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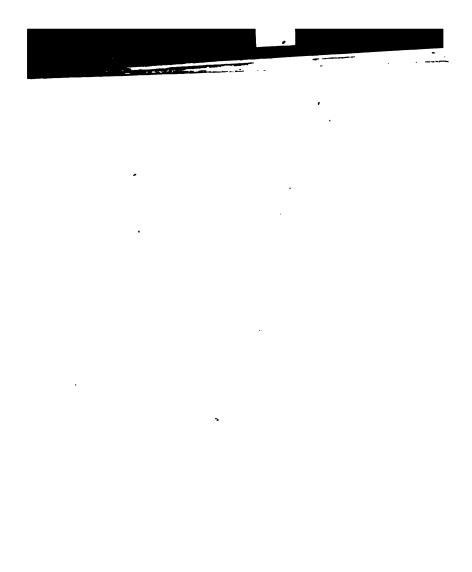
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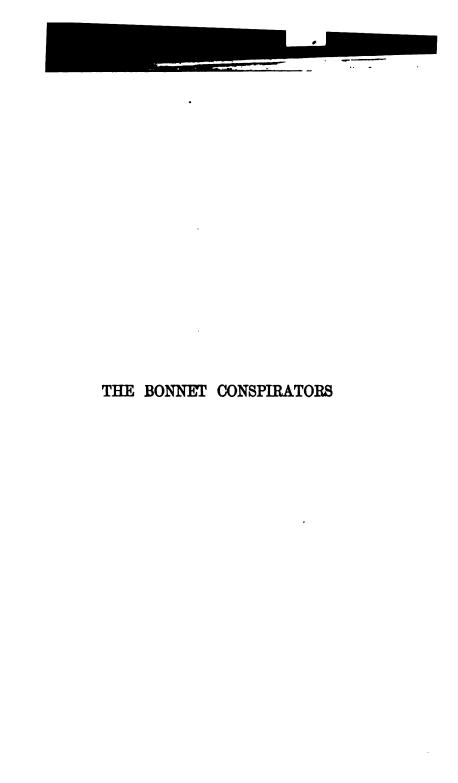


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THE BONNET CONSPIRATORS

A STORY OF 1818

BY

VIOLET A. SIMPSON

LONDON SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE 1908

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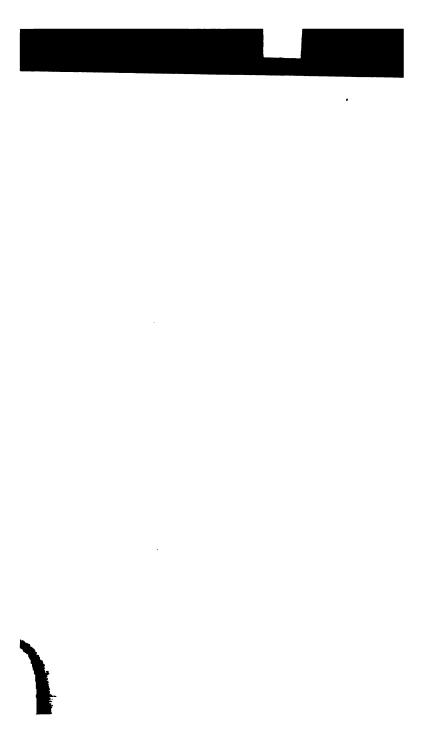
TO MY FATHER

In Remembrance of many happy Hours spent in Old-World Reminiscences of the Days when Romance and History went Hand-in-Hand throughout the Countryside where the scenes of this little Romance are laid,

I dedicate its Pages in

Affection and Reverence.

V. A. S.



THE

BONNET CONSPIRATORS

CHAPTER I

'THE question is,' said Lady Hepzibah, revolving with absorbed deliberation before the long oval-framed mirror which hung so conveniently between the two French windows, 'the question is—I have my doubts, my dear niece—does the colour become, really become me?'

'It matches your hair beautifully,' said Marie, speaking in all the honesty of undivided attention. And then she blushed crimson at her own thought-lessness, for whatever it was now, even she could remember the time when her aunt's hair had been bright as molten gold in sunshine, and the bonnet, arrested for a moment in mid-air above its natural resting-place as Lady Hepzibah looked round in mild surprise, was lined all through its expanding fan-shaped brim with a satin hovering in hue between dingy drab and a dull fawn.

- 'I—I mean your complexion,' added Marie, and then glancing desperately to where, above the bonnet-brim, three large pink gauze rosettes held in place the six nodding natural-coloured ostrich tips, 'The—the pink, of course, that is.'
- 'I was referring to the quilting, my love,' rejoined Lady Hepzibah, dropping the bonnet into position with a merely deprecating gesture of slight reproof for her niece's apparent inattention, and she turned with renewed interest to revolve once more before the big glass.

It gave back a pleasing reflection of a middleaged lady who had once been numbered amongst the beauties, although, in the sincere conviction that a 'has been' is for ever and aye in a different position from a 'never was,' Lady Hepzibah could not, perhaps, quite so free herself from the past as to accept exactly what her mirror It was the one weakness in an othertold her. wise puritanically sincere nature—less an insincerity, indeed, than an illusion. Had she retained fewer illusions on the subject herself, she might have induced more on the part of others by recourse to the pigments everybody had used in her girlhood, and which most women, even in 1815, thought quite legitimate, if only as a mere matter of following the Mode. But in the flush of triumphant youth Lady Hepzibah Deane had thought scorn of such a fashion, and matured character prevented her from adopting it in later.life.

Instead she quoted with calm naïveté the proverb of beauty unadorned at all the tea-parties in the neighbourhood, considering herself bound—in effect, no doubt, it really meant privileged—as Lady of the Manor, to inculcate right principles with outspoken consistency. No offence was ever taken. Everybody was on the best of terms in Lodeswell society, and it acknowledged but the one leader.

It was the undefined lurking consciousness of this her responsibility as Dictator and Natural Arbiter of Taste in the circle she so influenced that was exercising Lady Hepzibah's critical perceptions now. In those few moments of silent deliberation, while her bodily vision was filled with the combination of colour upon her head, destined at once to be an unimpeachable model for admiration and a standard for less well-regulated minds in all such matters, she was occupied mentally in reviewing every possible objection that could be brought to militate against its attaining complete success in these two aims.

She moved her head to right and to left, poising it first at this angle, and then at that; dipped, curtseyed, and nodded thoughtfully at her

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own reflection; marched some steps forward with the heavy decision of a well-instructed grenadier, swimming back again into the most suitable position for the light with all the elegance bestowed by an early Court training, and then drew herself up once more, stately and tall, to her full height, while Marie stood by, profoundly interested in all these evolutions and with only the faintest suspicion of anxiety—the anxiety born of her own responsibility as manufacturess of the bonnet in question—dawning in her limpid eyes, as the moments passed and still Lady Hepzibah's lips were rigidly set. She heaved quite a little sigh of relief when at last they parted.

'Is it at all like Miss Bullecroft's of last year?'

'That it is not!' she replied then with quick and decisive fervour.

It was just the one criticism too hard to be borne quite philosophically. Marie did not expect her handiwork to be found flawless, but this allusion to the confections of the Commandant's elderly sister touched to the quick, since they were usually meek travesties of her own.

Few of the ladies in that little seaside village thought scorn to be their own milliners, for in those early days of the nineteenth century life was more simple, and bonnets too afforded more engrossing scope for latent skill. No miserly wisps of lace, no meagre brims, no scanty plumes! A large and ample canvas for any mixtures the artiste might fancy did bonnets of that period proffer—a wheelbarrow load of artificial flowers, a baker's dozen of nodding plumes, yards upon yards of quilted lace, gauze, ribbons, or silk—nothing came as a burden to crowns like chimneypots and brims outstanding like the eaves of a cottage newly thatched. And Lady Hepzibah's bonnets, for size, amplitude, and the luxuriant profusion of their trimming, led the van in the fashion of those parts, as has been said.

Neither was she above mentioning any little economies in the manufacture, nor her niece's share in their contriving—all was a source of real pride, and she herself thoroughly appreciated the compliment paid by imitation. It was not the copying that Marie minded, but her pride centred in the artistic results of her inventive genius, and it hurt her to see them caricatured.

It was just in this that the poor Bullecrofts unconsciously overstepped the privileges naturally afforded by the special intimacy to which their close proximity as neighbours and a long friend-ship entitled them.

The Commandant, who divided his time between his house in Lodeswell—the little Red

House just a few yards beyond the Manor—and his military duties in connection with Langley Fort, had given in a lifetime of allegiance to Lady Hepzibah and all that belonged to her, from motives both of respect and sentiment, and, little autocrat as he was without the gates, became unconsciously, but none the less truly, as slavish a weakling once he stepped within them, as any vain sycophant for Court favour!

And since he himself was the model for all that was right to his timid, sweet-natured little sister, she found scope for her share of the family worship in a conscientious attempt to mould herself as near as might be upon the Deane standards, a form of flattery which Lady Hepzibah accepted as her natural due; Jacques—who respected nothing and nobody—as delightful material upon which to exercise his inimitable powers of mimicry, and which Marie only resented when it made her productions ridiculous.

- 'That blue made me a trifle sallow.'
- 'Yes-I mean oh no, Aunt Hepzibah.'

'And that green was too, too seasonal. You made it in spring, dear love, so no wonder. But one must not be too slavish to Nature's colouring, though it should be our happiness and comfort to copy her lessons in all else. One might have been asking the trees to drop leaves on one's head and

gummed them there—though you meant well, I know, my love.'

Marie nodded.

- 'And the red—there was something odd about those bows.'
- 'There was,' said Marie, briskly enough this time. She was grateful when criticisms turned only upon her part of the play, for these at least could be understood and obeyed.

It was the fifth retrimming of that particular bonnet, and the trial trips already made had been with every known shade, combination, and species of material. Marie had begun at eight that morning, and it was now past two. Lady Hepzibah might not know her own mind in the question of preliminary detail, and had usually no suggestions to offer of any use beforehand, but she had no hesitation in forming an opinion upon the completed composition.

However, Marie stood now surveying her aunt with nothing but interested equanimity. She only scraped one little sandalled foot upon the other because a bee had stung it that morning and the bandage was rather tight, and rubbed her round cheek against her round shoulder because a stray curl was tickling her, and sucked her needle-pierced left forefinger because it was rather sore. These were no signs of impatience: she

was only nineteen, and, you might see by the face of her, sweet-tempered. Nineteen and a philosophic temperament can afford to unpick and retrim for hours at a stretch with no misgivings as to waste of time.

'Now what can you suggest?' resumed Lady Hepzibah, smiling encouragingly at her bedizened reflection, and Molly gave one little sigh, less for the delicately conveyed prospect of a sixth attempt than for the furtive love she always bore to her own creations.

'We've tried the puce sarsanet—that was the first. You thought it too elderly. And the blue silk, and the green gauze, and the bit of yellow lutestring—you were afraid Miss Binns would remember it from my frock two years ago, because it was she who spilt the coffee down it. And this bit of maize—I really don't know, Aunt Hepzibah.'

Lady Hepzibah pursed up her mouth, and wrinkled her forehead in serious and concentrated thought.

'We have not yet tried lace,' she began, and then a flash of delighted relief suddenly dispersed the clouds. She went on in quick light tones. 'And now I recollect—there's my piece of convent lace—the lace I made myself as a girl at Malines! You have it, Marie—it would be just the thing!'

Marie's finger and foot all at once ceased to

require attention. She pulled herself bolt upright in an instant, while her hands dropped to her sides, and her eyes, big and grey, became bigger and darker with a look of absolute terror. Lady Hepzibah was near-sighted, and with her pale protruding eyes glued to the glass she noticed nothing of her niece's agitation.

- 'Oh, you gave it to me!'
- 'Yes, child, yes, and you shall have it back?
- 'Oh, but----'
- 'Niece, do you hesitate to lend it? My own handiwork, the price paid for my present imperfect vision! Niece, I must blush for you!'
 - 'Oh, don't!'

Lady Hepzibah turned her face upon Marie with astonished apprehension lengthening every line. There was in her tone almost the ring of tragedy.

- 'It is lost?'
- 'Oh, no, Aunt Hepzibah! I—I—It's only that I'm not quite sure where it is.' Marie shivered at the near approach of a lie. Oh, Jacques! Oh, that roll of convent lace! Where was it but in Mr. Dangars's loan-repository, left as pledge for no less than 50l., marked now, This Lot, No. 1060. It might have gratified Lady Hepzibah to have found her handiwork so highly appraised, but scarcely, had she known by whom!

Those were days of universal smuggling, and Mr. Dangars was the general 'receiver' down Hastings way. Jacques Maclean, and a good many others, young and old, in Lodeswell, not above sharing in a 'run' with intent to evade Government duties, knew him on very familiar terms. Jacques never had any money, and the chance had been irresistible. Dangars had gloated over the beautiful piece of work, and so had Jacques over his 50l. Marie was the only one who had nothing to show for the transaction, except a twin brother's absolute and entire confidence.

Lady Hepzibah recovered herself and glanced round again with her usual serene smile.

'You shall use that then, dear. It's a lovely pattern, and quite unique. Your taste is always charming, too. I like no one's so well; but you don't mind my just remarking that I think this maize——'

'Oh, no!' interrupted Marie gratefully, feeling indeed that any diversion was welcome, and she smiled back again at her with all her wonted light-hearted sunniness. Lady Hepzibah kissed her affectionately, and patted her cheek with her mittened hand.

'Dear, good child! My constant comfort and help,' she said fondly. 'And now that's settled I

think I may safely take this off, and get ready to drink tea with Miss Bullecroft. Such a comfort, dear child, to feel that that worry is over.'

She returned to the glass just to give a few farewell pats to her coils and ringlets, shook out her lilac silk skirts, adjusted her black gauze tippet, and then, fixing at its right angle on her head a bonnet of cerise and grey, equally large but less gaudy, which lay on the chair beside her, gave the discarded one to her niece with the air of a sultana.

'You may perhaps have it ready to try on by the time I return, with your nimble little fingers,' she added, disappearing into the garden through the open French window.

A turfed walk running all along that side of the Manor house—the front looked to the west, and owned a portico, a gravelled sweep, and double oak gates crowned with griffins—led to the door in the high brick wall which separated the garden from the village street. The family seldom used any other mode of egress than this side door, especially when in summer the windows of the peacock parlour stood always open. Lady Hepzibah trailed majestically down the path, and Marie watched her out of sight, and then turned her perplexed face to the sunny south and the soft south-west wind blowing gently up from the

Channel, while her eyes roamed vaguely over the broad waste of blue with its dancing white horses crowning each fresh wave. The tide was flowing. The rocks green with seaweed, and the beds of glistening blue clay which never seemed to dry however hot the sun might be, were all covered now, and up over the hard yellow ribbed sands and soft grey quicksands the great breakers, with the decision of a task nearly done, were rolling in triumphantly to their goal—the beach line was already within reach of the spray. It was a glorious day, and the July sunshine leapt from crest to crest, marking a glittering pathway that rose to meet the line of sky. The gardens sloped downwards, low wide hedges dividing them from the steep hill of nearly half a mile of gorse common that succeeded: then came the cliffs with their short thick turf, and then the beach.

On a clear day it was said you might almost fancy that you could see the white line of the French coast. There were plenty of anxious searchers, too, in those days—the martello towers dotted along the incurving sweep of the coastline at regular intervals to Beachy Head told their own tale, and the occasional glimpses of white sails by day, and the watch-lights flashing by night from the cruisers beating up and down Channel were as beacons of safety to all nervous shore-

dwellers even while their very existence signified danger.

But Marie was not troubling her curly head as to any likelihood of a French landing. What troubled her was that lace! How to account for it, how make up for it—alas! how to make up That Bonnet without it? She looked at the sea, at the sky, at the grass, at the roses. The air smelt sweet, even though damp with salt. She sniffed it, and began to hum, picked one of the roses and stuck it in her hair. Philosophy, youth, and the joy of life brought their own panacea and relief.

'Well, till Jacques comes home I can't do anything. So I suppose I may as well unpick this,' she observed to herself presently, and gaily swinging the rejected bonnet round and round by its strings, trailing plumes and pink gauze recklessly, she went indoors, carried her little worktable and stool close to the window whence she could command a view of the world outside, and set at once to work. The wind stirred her fair hair as she bent over, snipping with the sharp decision of the originator not afraid to destroy because able to restore. It stirred presently with a stronger and more vivid rustling in the trees outside, then, with a curious little sudden rush like a breath quickly indrawn, it stopped, and

Marie, knowing well what that momentary lull meant, leant forward the better to listen, letting bonnet and scissors fall. A lull, a little hush as it were of expectancy, a thrill, and then the delicate shiver of a plash, as the first wave of the flowing tide breaks on the shore! How Marie loved it-one of the myriad voices she must always stop, and wait, and strain, and thrill to hear, whatever was claiming her attention or thoughts. And as she sat now, all her soul and every feeling hushed to catch the faint mystic murmur, suddenly upon the pause there rose another sound—a human sound—a long, low, soft whistle, and in an instant the Dream-moment slipped to action. She sprang to her feet and went out—to left, to right, up and down and round scanning the garden, cliff, hill, horizonand then curving her hands round her mouth she repeated the notes herself. A few seconds later the bushes at the far south-west corner of the garden parted, and a boyish, surly, red head came cautiously through.

'All's well!' called Marie, in low quick tones.

'So!' said he, under his breath, and then doubling over the grass like a rabbit—'Go in! Quick! Hurry!'

Any one might have known them for brother and sister. There were the same clearly cut

features, the same almond-shaped eyes set far apart in a way that lent an extraordinary air of innocent candour to their faces, the same upward curl of the mouth at the corners. Only Marie's hair was curly and fair, Jacques' curly and red; her eyes a liquid soft grey, his keen and bright; and where the sister's face was rounded, soft, and childish still, the boy's was thin, lined, and stamped with knowledge of life at first hand. Marie had never tried to see it except through his eyes.

Jacques took in the room with one sweeping glance, and dropped into the nearest chair with a sigh of relief. Marie stood by and looked him over in silence.

He was covered from head to foot with half-dried blobs of clay—the iron-clay of the wealden cliffs. His hands were grimed with gunpowder, and the smell hanging about his clothes accentuated and explained certain unmistakable stains of red and brown. One sleeve of his tightly buttoned overcoat was half torn out, he had no hat, and his hair hung in plastered rat-tails down his forehead—men wore their hair longer in those days. As to his face, where you could see it for dirt, it was of a ghastly pallor, with the eyes, red-rimmed, sunk deep in the head. The very way in which he let his body relax at full length

in the low chair, his hands falling limp and open, palms uppermost, upon the floor on either side of him, spoke of exhaustion and fatigue so great as to defy either caution or reserve.

- 'Aunt Hep?'
- 'She's drinking tea at Miss Bullecroft's.'
- 'Something for me to drink, my dear.'

Marie dived out of the room into the passage. and was back in a few seconds with a pewter aleflagon and a tankard. A preconcerted arrangement was this, for Jacques' special benefit, involving only forethought. an unsuspected cupboard, and no servants' knowledge. Jacques emptied the tankard at one draught, and without speaking held it out to be replenished. Marie, without a word, filled it from the great flagon she was carrying. In silence, too, she fetched from the same hiding-place and set down beside him a plate of sandwiches, thick and solid, upon which he fell like a wolf. Silently she put a cushion behind his head, and with her silk handkerchief, dipped in the crystal bowl of rosewater which always stood on the little Chippendale cabinet just below the big mirror, wiped the dirt and perspiration from his forehead. The brother accepted in the same spirit that the sister gave; they understood each other very well.

Jacques emptied his third tankard, rolled it

amiably along the floor to her feet, and said 'Good!'

Marie picked up the tankard, put it carefully away with plate and flagon again, and then went back to her seat and waited. She asked nothing in words, but Jacques' eyes met hers.

- 'My dear girl,' he began—and pulled himself round in the cushioned chair as if he suddenly felt a draught. 'Marie, it's a hanging business this time.'
 - 'Jacques!'
- 'We'd a regular scrimmage. Well, I can't help it: why did the fools refuse me my commission? Catholic, forsooth? Fudge! It's so dull, a man must do something!'
- 'Was it last night? All night? Were you out all night?'

Jacques glanced down at himself.

'Rather! Cliff, sand—I've been hiding in the gorse these six hours past, watching the windows and for Aunt Hep to go! Bless my Lord Bullecroft and his sister for once! This is the first thing I've tasted since yesterday evening.'

He crammed his remaining sandwich into his mouth.

'The tide served us well, so did the moon. A grand haul. Capital run!' 'Oh, Jacques! But if----'

Marie's chin sank into the upturned hollow of her hands, as she sat propping her elbows on her knees.

Jacques dragged himself up, and peered round the window next to him, looked sharply all about, returned, opened the door into the house-passage, sniffed suspiciously down it, locked the door, and then strolled leisurely back.

'Must 'ware rats! I don't mind telling you, Marie, of course,' he added simply. 'Well, it's been an awful night's work! Generally, you know, it's just the fun, and so on. Last night the revenue cutter was out; we were just coming ashore in at the Gap, and they tried to run us down. We couldn't have got away, but Drury rammed the helm down hard, and made straight into them instead. She heeled right over, and went aground. We righted, a miracle it was, the tide was running strong with that gale, but Drury had reckoned on that, and so we got ashore. However, they'd a party of men waiting for us there under the lee of the cliff, and everything got mixed up a bit then. Four of our men were shot, and half-a-dozen of them. I can't give you details, you're a girl,' he added. 'Twas sickening though. These men are fiends when they get their blood up. It's wanton brutality!'

- 'But you? Did any one recognise you?'
- 'No, I think not. We all got off, though they nearly had us up Veness Gap, with those wounded fellows to carry. They're getting cunning, these Excise devils. Some one's turned king's evidence, we think; however, we'll soon make an example of whoever 'tis when we catch him—and catch him we will.'
 - 'Oh, Jacques!'
- 'You don't understand—you're a girl—however, I wish I'd been out of it. They're honest men, those revenues, even so. I've never been in a downright fight over it before, it's unpleasant—why can't they let me go and fight the French, there'd be use in that!' Jacques thrust his hands savagely into his breeches pockets, and strode up and down the room, while Marie followed his movements with helpless anxious eyes.
 - 'The Commandant fights well,' he went on.
- 'Oh, Jacques, was he there? I hope he didn't see you!'
- 'So do I. Spoil my last hope of a commission if he did. Very nearly trussed the old gentleman, too,' went on Jacques with a grin. 'Should have stopped at home and in bed at his age—but he's no shirk anyway. What I've saved Aunt Hep! I knocked the man's cutlass up only just in time,

or he'd have been in kingdom come by now, instead of arming her into Miss B.'s tea!'

He burst out laughing, with the easy versatility of Celtic youth. The fires of excitement leapt to cheek and eye as the recollection of the night's events came crowding back—It was good to be a man, with a sword in one's hand.

'Twas exciting, Moll!' He paused in his abrupt walk by her chair. 'You can't understand. It's brutal. I hate it afterwards, but at the time one forgets it all but just the chasing, and then the getting away, and one's blood gets up, and then one likes the fighting!' he added with a half-shamed look of apology. 'But I'd give a good deal if those poor wretches had got off.'

He again dropped heavily into his chair; the light faded, he swept his hand across his forehead and was silent.

'What became of your wounded?' said Marie presently, in a hushed voice.

'Freeman and Wicks were dead; we left them. Two of them we took off to Brigden's Farm. The other was a Frenchy, who boarded us out in mid-channel with the cargo. I talked to him some time coming over; he knew all the ins and outs of the war, from their side, you know —oh, Moll, how I wish I were there! We got him up to Grimsey's, and there Dr. Scape met us, and he's got him now. In hiding, of course. The whole village will be in it once they begin finding out. By the way——'

Jacques jerked himself to his feet, and began unbuttoning his coat.

'The poor fellow was delirious, and had got some peculiar fancy about this bale; he had got it tucked away under his coat, and when we were dressing his wound—'twas through the lungs, he won't last out the month—we came upon it. It might have been a king's ransom by the fuss he made, instead of a beggarly roll of lace. He wouldn't let us take it away till we had promised all sorts of things as to secrecy and confidence, and so on. At last I promised to take it and keep it safely till he could have it again, and that seemed to pacify him. So here 'tis.'

'Why, it's lace just like Aunt Hepzibah's!'

'Lace! I should think so! Yards of it! I had to undo it, and wind half of it round and round myself under my coat before I could get the bundle into any pocket! I couldn't have carried it by hand, of course. Good idea, wasn't it?' said Jacques, tugging off his coat.

The lace was swathed round and round his body, the end dipping into the tail pocket of the discarded coat. Jacques dived into it to bring up the remainder of the bale in a hard, closely wound

bundle, even then with so much of it unwound as big as a fair-sized melon.

'I got into it tee-to-tum fashion, so I'll get out the same way, I rackon, as these Sussex men say. Hold, my dear, while I turn! There must 'be miles of it!'

Jacques spun round and round, Marie winding up the lace as fast as he undid it. It was ludicrous, and presently both burst out laughing.

'I can't wind so fast,' cried Marie. 'Oh, Jacques, dear boy! How funny you look!'

'My dear girl, I must be rid of it before I can do anything, and I want to go and change. Ha, hullo! Who's that? Moll! they're coming in by the garden door! Wretches, fiends, impudent dogs!'

Marie literally tumbled across to the window, glanced sharply round, and looked back with a face alive with excited terror.

'Oh, it's the Commandant, and a man, a stranger, with him! Oh, Jacques, quick, quick! Fly! Where's the key? There'll be just time to get into the passage.'

Jacques, in a muddle of lace all about his feet and legs, was already at the door, working vindictively at the lock.

'Rusty! . . . Won't turn. Broken, of course. That's no good. Here, Marie, quick march!

Tear it — scratch — cut — scissors, teeth — anything!

'Oh, dare we cut it?'

'Dare! If he sees this I'm lost!' retorted Jacques, savagely muttering all sorts of things not meant for Marie's ears under his breath, while he gyrated, panting and flushed, like a fast-driven humming-top, and both girl and boy tore wildly at the lace dropping round him in filmy rings. 'Cut it? Of course. There, never mind that piece, it'll pass as your bonnet trimmings; pretend you're using it for trimmings. I'll manage the bale. Hurrah! Triumph! Done!'

The moment's suspense was over, the snipped end of lace lay in a heap with Marie's work-materials, and the bale had disappeared again under Jacques' coat! Jacques braced himself up. and Marie rushed to the window. It was just in time.

The Commandant was at that instant stepping into view, and now bowed himself across the sill with profuse apologies. As an old friend he had ventured to come round that way sans cérémonie, and without waiting for permission to bring with him a young friend—'Mr. Devignes,' he wound up, with a wave of his disengaged left hand towards the man waiting passively just behind him, towering, indeed, over his portly little frame as

he stood blocking up the window. His right hand still paternally held Marie's, and the confusion with which she received his apologies, explanations, and introductions, and which sat very prettily upon her, might have been due to this, for it was an open secret in the community that the Commandant only needed a word from Lady Hepzibah to stand as she did in loco parentis to her young nephew and niece.

Mr. Devignes raised heavy-lidded eyes to look into Marie's for one brief half-second, as he straightened himself after a sweeping bow, whose grace she intuitively recognised as belonging to another school of manners than that of his fussy little sponsor.

She felt a shock of sudden apprehension at the sight of him—this was a man very unlike any one whom she had ever seen, and what did that peculiar glance mean? Her guilty conscience with its burdening secret made her curiously afraid, for otherwise he appeared quite inoffensive. His clothes were of the plainest cut and most sober hue of dark brown; he seemed about thirty years old, and staid at that. But the very absence of manner with which he stepped from behind the shelter of the Commandant into the little room, instead of lessening, somehow added to the impression both Marie and Jacques instantly

received that his ordinary path in life lay in a sphere as far removed from the provincial society to which they were restricted, as in birth and upbringing they themselves—alas for an adverse fate and circumstances!—were above it. He brought a strange unfamiliar atmosphere into their midst, and Marie shivered, though she hardly knew why.

'You won't have met Mr. Devignes, either, Jacques, my boy,' said the Commandant, and his homely tones roused her from her painful abstraction. She pulled herself together with an effort, but dared not look across at Jacques. He, however, standing with tightly buttoned coat, idly snipping at nothing with her big scissors, while in an absentminded manner he stirred with one foot a heap of frippery on the floor—a bonnet half unpicked, bits of satin, Marie's workbag, and a tangled mass of lace—lifted great innocent eyes.

The Commandant always had the power of rousing in him oddly defiant feelings, and the humour of the situation had immediately occurred to him.

'No?' said he mildly. As to not knowing Devignes, he laughed inwardly to remember that not twenty-four hours before this man and he had been crossing swords in a deadly duel. The demon of mischief entering in prompted him to

try his fate. 'Yet I fancy somehow your face seems strangely familiar.'

'Indeed?' replied Mr. Devignes; 'I too might fancy perhaps—your eyes——'

Jacques smiled in airiest fashion. He had worn a velvet mask the night before, but eye to eye they had fought! And beneath the smile his lips tightened, for Devignes' words had been an admission. Now Jacques knew his man, and just how far this visit was unpremeditated. He looked straight across as Devignes spoke. The glance that passed between the two men lasted but a moment. It meant perfect mutual recognition. But in proportion as Jacques' heart sank his sporting instinct rose. He was a Celt to the backbone.

The Commandant—murmuring gentle regrets at Lady Hepzibah's absence—seemingly surprised to learn what he knew quite well, having timed his visit accordingly, that she was at that very moment supposed to be under his own roof, while his little brown eyes, pale and bright as polished bamboo, roved restlessly round—was all at once relegated in the lad's mind to the position of spectator only. He might scrutinise as he pleased, he was a non-combatant; to be reckoned with, but not with a two-edged sword. A blunt rapier and an open guard good enough for him—

Jacques knew now which man was the one to be feared!

- 'You are thinking I treat my sister's work and my aunt's belongings badly, Commandant?' said he lightly. 'What do you say, Marie?'
- 'It is surely too good lace to be spoilt,' said the Commandant, with stiff courtesy. 'Allow me!'

He was rising from his chair, but Jacques was too quick, though it was with an almost indolent movement that he swept lace, bonnet, and all into his sister's lap.

'There, Marie! And you know what Aunt Hepzibah's parting request was. I'm sure the Commandant and Mr. Devignes'—he bowed with a charming uplifting of one corner of his mobile lips towards the latter, sitting silent in his corner—'will forgive your going on with your work. She expects it to be ready for church to-morrow, or at least for Miss Callycombe's party on Tuesday. You will be there, Commandant?'

'I hope so,' said the Commandant. 'We can but admire Miss Marie's industry. What superb lace, indeed! May I examine the pattern? The ladies will all be sadly envious!'

He put out his hand with intent to lift a corner of the lace from Marie's lap, but before he

could reach it, with an exclamation of 'Oh, Jacques, careless boy!' she in a moment had left her chair, bundling her work unceremoniously up into a fold of her skirt.

'How can I trim a bonnet with everything in my lap? Give me a chair where I can reach my table,' she added.

The table was on the side of the window furthest from where the Commandant and Mr. Devignes sat. Marie faced them now, but the table was between. Jacques took Marie's vacant chair. It placed him close to the Commandant, but no one could pass his long legs stretched lazily out straight in front of him and effectually barring the way to Marie's side, without an excuse to do so more potent than either visitor was sufficiently at home to make.

The Commandant gave a sidelong glance of suspicion at both innocent faces, and then fixed an uncompromising, gaze on Jacques' legs and boots.

- 'You have been far afield in dirty places,' he snapped, finding puss-in-the-corner an irritating game.
- 'Rat-catching,' said Jacques pleasantly. 'Dirty work, but rare sport.'
- 'And sometimes dangerous. Do you ever get bitten?' It was Mr. Devignes who spoke.

- 'Often, often!' Jacques smiled like a happy boy from school, and ran his black fingers delicately through his red curls. The scent of intrigue was as elixir to his imagination. The actual moment of danger past, he was now enjoying himself thoroughly.
 - 'They show good fight sometimes, you find?'
 - 'Even draw blood occasionally.'
- 'There is blood now on your sister's lace. What a pity! Are you responsible for that?' Mr. Devignes ran his eye comprehensively down Jacques' soiled person. 'Men shouldn't touch ladies' work after—ratting. Nor let them be in any way concerned in such sports.' He looked Jacques full in the face as he finished, with a gleam in his eyes, and a momentary uplifting of one eyebrow. It was not like the Commandant's mode of scrutiny, and Jacques instantly recognised it.
- 'What do you say, Marie?' he said, and gave a careless little laugh enough, though the left corner of his upper lip twitched. Every one has his own peculiar sign-manual of mental distress, some unconscious physical manifestation which eludes even the most perfect self-control. This was Jacques'; Marie knew it. Both saw now, for the first time, that the strip of lace she was drawing out of the tangled mass was blood-

stained. She had been busying herself mechanically, obeying an instinctive desire to account for the nervous restlessness of her fingers. On the impulse of the moment she would have dropped the lace, but, catching Jacques' expression, held on to it as if glued. But her heart stood still, and she drew her breath with a gasp.

'You must have been badly bitten,' observed Mr. Devignes with a quiet deliberation that made both brother and sister wince.

'Scarcely fresh either; quite twelve hours dry! And you never noticed it before? Why, Jacques, my boy, you emulate the Spartans.'

A dull red mounted to Jacques' forehead at the rasping triumph in the Commandant's tones, and his lip twitched uncontrollably.

'Jacques is guiltless, you see,' interposed Marie very quietly, before he could speak. She did not look up, and her hands, upon which Mr. Devignes' eyes were intently fixed, were now tightly folded down in her lap. 'I spoilt the lace myself by my carelessness!'

'You cut yourself, Marie? Oh, where?'

The two older men glanced sharply round, and one at least looked away with a sensation of having been baffled, for the spontaneity of genuine surprise rang in Jacques' tone. 'Yes, where, dear Miss Marie? And not even a bandage!'

The Commandant was not to be checked in his advance this time; over Jacques' defence he strode. There was not a scratch to be seen on the fair uncovered neck above the folded kerchief, and the naked arms and hands were innocent of either wound or semblance of bandage.

It was but one little helpless breath she drew—
no one could have seen the start of terror she
gave. Marie was not conscious herself, as she
raised her eyes for one quick second before dropping the lids to hide the rising tears of sheer
nervous excitement, how the pathetic appeal in
them for some sort of protection had struck a
chord and roused the chivalry in that silent
watcher over against her. Devignes rose from
his chair as if in answer.

'Can you not see that Miss Maclean's foot is bandaged, and must pain her terribly? It would be more merciful to leave her to nurse it undisturbed and in peace. May we make our adieux, sir?' He spoke quietly, and looked towards the Commandant, who rose at once, and Jacques noted, if Marie did not, the ring of authority in the tones of the one man and the unwonted docility in the behaviour of the other as something worth thinking about. Devignes seemed quite simply,

and as a matter of course, to take the direction of affairs. In another three minutes apologies, parting messages to Lady Hepzibah, and goodbyes were over, and Jacques, ostentatiously displaying his mud, tatters, and general dishevelment, was escorting the visitors with a show of much cordiality to the garden gate, his active brain, in the midst of his friendly chatter, busily employed in putting two and three together, and speculating whence was to come the missing unit which would make a clear six.

'I should advise you to be more careful of your rats next time, my boy,' snarled the Commandant, as he clicked the latch.

'And of your sister's lace,' added Devignes lightly, flicking with his cane at a long pendant flying from under Jacques' coat-tails.

Jacques laughed, made a low bow, and shut the door with a stifled 'Hurrah!' Marie was standing in the window anxiously watching. He ran up the path towards her at full speed, tucked one arm round her waist, and lifted her over the sill.

'Clever little puss, then!' he remarked in highest good spirits. 'But what a thundering interfering old fool that Bullecroft is! I'll forbid the banns if ever Aunt Hep accepts him!'

Marie laughed, but not very mirthfully.

'It isn't the Commandant we need mind. Oh, Jacques, who can that man be, and what can he want? What awful eyes!'

Jacques loosened his hold to take a restless turn up the room, and Marie sat down rather helplessly, as if her limbs could no longer bear her weight.

'Oh, you noticed that, did you?' he said after a moment's pause. 'He's the man I fought with last night. He recognised me, too. Of course, that's why they came; we got the better of them, but it's an open secret, I can see,' he added gloomily. 'I'm very much afraid it means trouble.'

'And that's not all,' said Marie desperately.
'Oh, Jacques, Aunt Hep wants the lace—her convent lace which you sold to Dangars. I didn't dare tell her, but she has left me this to be trimmed with it by to-morrow!' She stopped abruptly, blurting out her words in her misery without attempt at palliation.

'Aunt Hepzibah's lace! That lace!'

Jacques stopped dead, with a long whistle, and his face lengthened till it scarcely looked his own.

'By to-morrow, Jacques!' repeated Marie again; then as she met his eyes both laughed, a dreary, defiant laugh, the sense of the humorous

hopelessness of their position coming home to them.

Jacques thrust his hands into his pockets, wheeled sharp off, and began striding up and down the room. His fertile brain was hard at work, and presently, as ideas flowed in offering possible escape from the double dilemma, his pace slackened, the frown disappeared, and he stopped by Marie's chair with a return of the old self-confident glint in his eyes, which meant that he was reasserting his power over circumstances, and meant to make them fit to his own will.

'There's just one thing for it,' he said decidedly, 'and only one that'll square it all. Now just listen carefully. They've got this wretched lace as a clue—of course they know I was "out" fast enough, and I'm afraid from the way they came here they mean business, and they'll catch hold of the smallest thing, and drive it home till they've nailed it. Still, they've no shadow of proof. But, I say, Moll, what a play it was with that old ferret; he doesn't love me much at any time—less than ever now! He was wild at being tricked out of his little game. I wasn't going to let him play his trumps. But now the thing is, we must foil their trying it again-you see, once they begin asking where the lace came from, say before Aunt Hep, we're lost.'

'Couldn't we tell Aunt Hep? Oh, Jacques, it's so wretched pretending.' Marie sat with her head buried in her hands, and spoke in the dreariest of tones. Jacques paused, looked silently at her, and then, after a few minutes' consideration, spoke with a depth of seriousness that was final. 'No, I don't see how we could. Aunt Hep would think it her duty to tell. If it was only for myself—but that would mean implicating the others; and, Marie, it's a case of murder, mind you, and hanging, once it comes to that. It's no joke. No.' He took another stride.

'This is my plan. We've first of all Aunt Hep to pacify, and then we've got those two. Now, Aunt Hep's lace I can't recover from Dangars in time to prevent her asking questions, that's certain. I'll ride over to-night or to-morrow and do my best—but I haven't a penny, and I don't know who'll lend me as much at a moment's notice. To-morrow's Sunday, and you've got to get this thing,' he kicked the bonnet squarely across the room, 'ready for her to wear. Now you do as I say. The bale itself you must hide in your room—you won't need that. Take this lace, this length we've had to cut off, and use it now for to-morrow on this bonnet. Fuss it about so she won't guess, and it'll pass muster till I can

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get her own back. They'll be put off the scent, too, by that if by anything: the Commandant won't dare to be ferreting about Aunt Hep's head, wherever he pokes his suspicious nose. He's well-meaning, and it's only his duty, but, by ——! when he calls me "My boy" I wish I'd let that cutlass slice him up!' said Jacques, with an unpleasant grin.

CHAPTER II

THE Commandant and Devignes looked at each other with a glance of mutual comprehension as the garden door closed behind them—rather too unceremoniously perhaps for the perfect good faith of Jacques' elaborate bow and parting smile, especially when a suspicious burst of laughter came floating over from his side of the wall. The Commandant flushed angrily.

'He flaunts his thief's spoils in my very face!' he exclaimed irritably. 'The young wretch!'

Devignes surveyed him with an amused twinkle hidden beneath his half-dropped eyelids. The little scene they had just gone through had thrown a certain light upon the business he had personally in hand, and which was the reason of his present visit to Lodeswell, the things most annoying to the Commandant being the very ones he found instructive. His own dignity was far too innately a part of himself ever to feel the pin-pricks of possible insults, and the Commandant's attitude of out-

raged pride he thought quite entertaining. His sense of humour was keen, and, moreover, a strangely strong feeling of interest in the pair they had just left was taking hold of him to the exclusion of any other. The two curly-headed culprits, playing so nimbly into each other's hands, and foiling all the attempts of two such inquisitors as himself and the Commandant who really held the position so entirely in their hands, appealed to him with a lurking admiration. He merely shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and reverted to the main issue.

'Do you feel sure that that was the lace we were to look for?'

'I'm convinced I saw the cipher in that strip. Miss Marie was drawing it through her hands, if you remember. It was repeated—the same design—on the end of every yard. Besides, of course the rogue had been "out," with his ratting and impudence!

'Oh, well, most probably, 'said Devignes, lightly evasive. 'The thing is—of course I don't care about this lad except as a clue—Where's the man who brought it over?'

The Commandant stood still and stamped on the ground.

'That lad's at the bottom of it. A young scoundrel through and through!'

Devignes smiled again.

- 'Oh, no! Scarcely so bad! Say a diplomat rather young at his work.'
- 'When I see a boot covered with mud I say it's dirty, and have done with it,' returned the Commandant shortly. 'The boy isn't straightforward, and that to my mind is three parts on to downright falsehood. Call it what you like!'

Devignes for all reply pushed open the gate of the Little Red House for the Commandant to precede him, and proved how old he had grown in the service of diplomacy by keeping any further opinions he might have on the subject to himself. It was just forty-eight hours since he had arrived in Lodeswell, on a Government mission so difficult that it was taxing all his well-tried powers of ingenuity to unravel the knots of the mesh that enwrapped it about with mystery.

The Commandant alone was in the secret both of his real identity and of his purpose in coming to the little village—his confidant and coadjutor of necessity, but already Devignes was beginning to distrust his discretion, and believe that to be successful the business must both begin and end with himself. A man who could not control his irritation seemed to him quite unfit to be anything but a pawn, since losing temper was simply playing into the adversary's hands.

'You say those children are half French? Is there any reason to believe they have French relations with whom they correspond?' he asked after a moment's pause.

'Jacques Maclean can hardly make a mark to his name—idle young dog!' returned the Commandant sulkily. 'I know, for I tried once at Lady Hepzibah's wish to teach him something of military tactics. He was extremely anxious to go into the army, but the uniform was all he thought necessary. And as to Miss Marie, she would have no secrets from her aunt, of course!'

'From her aunt?' queried Devignes, pausing as they paced slowly up the little path.
'Oh!'

'I see Lady Hepzibah now with my sister,' suddenly exclaimed the Commandant, and a note of such boyish eagerness quickened in his voice that Devignes looked quickly at him with some surprise, immediately narrowing his eyelids to fix a concentrated gaze upon the unconscious reason of this change in his companion.

Lady Hepzibah, stately and erect, was just stepping out of the little rose-covered porch, with dignified graciousness inclining her cerise-and-grey-crowned head towards little Miss Bullecroft, who, twittering and fluttering in the delightful

agitation of the performance of her duties as hostess, hovered first on this side of her and then on that. Miss Bullecroft was robed in brown taffeta so befrilled and beribboned that her little brown head and pale features were almost swallowed up, and Devignes, as he bowed to both ladies, was irresistibly reminded of an African parrot courteously accepting the advances of some little hedge-sparrow.

Lady Hepzibah received the introduction with a mixture of cordiality and gentle reserve which he was obliged to acknowledge reached the very acme of perfection in manner, and if it had not been for the varied hues of her apparel, which offended his taste, and conveyed the instantaneous idea of her being both vain and empty-minded, he must have been favourably impressed. As it was, after the necessary courtesies and one comprehensive glance, he turned instinctively to Miss Bullecroft, leaving to the Commandant the privilege of escorting his guest to the gate.

'Is it not sweet?' said Miss Bullecroft, clasping her hands together as she watched the two retreating forms, and a gentle flush rose in her delicate colourless cheeks. 'It is the one of dear Marie's bonnets I think I like the best! It reminds me—that beautiful combination—of the first blush of dawn rising in the grey mist of a

summer morning. Do you not agree with me, Mr. Devignes? I never can help so connecting the two.'

Devignes screwed up his face meditatively, but answered with perfect seriousness—

'Are you alluding to Lady Hepzibah's bonnet? I am afraid, dear Miss Bullecroft, I am a very poor critic of such art—and I have not your poetical fancy,' he added, though with a very kindly glance, for he had mixed in far too much artificial society not at once to be able to discern genuine simplicity, and find it refreshingly attractive.

'I am very silly, I fear,' said Miss Bullecroft, with a fleeting sigh. 'But I do think even paltry things like clothes can be made suggestive of pleasing ideas, and may hold some hidden meaning in their colour and form, and even materials! When Marie wears her blue muslin frock with white ribbons it is just as if a little bit of beautiful sky had floated down to bring us some of its own happy, sunny, heaven-born thoughts. She is full of sunshine always, Mr. Devignes—such a sweet, happy nature! You would think so, too,' she added half apologetically, as if ashamed of her enthusiasm, 'if you knew her as we do.'

Devignes smiled back encouragingly into the

tender, faded hazel eyes uplifted to his—a smile few people ever saw.

- 'I can quite believe it,' he replied, with a certain unmistakeable sincerity that seemed to reassure Miss Bullecroft, for she nodded confidingly back, and continued—
 - 'And when she is in white, why then ----'
 - 'And then?'
- 'Why, I think she is like a seraph in disguise!' finished the little old lady, dropping her voice to a reverential whisper. 'If you won't think me profane.'
- 'Most certainly not,' said Devignes emphatically. 'And does Miss Maclean make all her aunt's bonnets?'
- 'Every one!' said Miss Bullecroft solemnly, as if it was for some sacred function that Marie's needle and thread were requisitioned. 'And tomorrow we are to see the very latest! It is to be all of lace, the most priceless and beautiful lace! A new and quite, quite original design—dear Marie is hard at work now!'

Devignes looked down at her flushed face with a dubious expression upon his own.

'Does Miss Marie like doing it?' he asked slowly. 'Why should she make all Lady Hepzibah's bonnets? Wouldn't she rather be riding or playing, or going out herself to tea-parties?'

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Miss Bullecroft stopped short in her delicate little tripping walk, and a look of absolute pain darkened the hazel eyes which she lifted reproachfully to his.

'Oh, Mr. Devignes! Marie would never rather be doing such things when she could be occupied with anything for her dear aunt! And what a privilege it is for her, too! You cannot surely mean what you say!'

Devignes smothered the remark that rose to his lips. His could not be the hand to strike illusions from this simple-hearted devotee, though his opinion of Lady Hepzibah and the circumstances remained unaltered.

'Let me at least say how entirely I envy both Lady Hepzibah and Miss Maclean so true and kindly a partisan,' he observed instead. 'Would that I were so sure of a good character at the hands of my friends!'

'At the hands of your *friends*, surely,' returned Miss Bullecroft, with quiet assurance that somehow made her for the moment as dignified as Lady Hepzibah herself.

The Commandant was just returning from his escort of Lady Hepzibah across the road to the garden door, walking briskly towards them up the little path, and before Devignes had time to reply, Miss Bullecroft, making some hasty excuse, withdrew quietly into the house. The Commandant planted himself in front of Devignes with a slightly defiant air, and Devignes looked him over rather quizzically.

'I hear we are to have a new bonnet tomorrow,' he observed. 'Miss Bullecroft tells me that Miss Maclean is hard at work on it now! It is to be all of lace and quite, quite original!'

'Then our task will be easy!' replied the Commandant pompously. His interview with Lady Hepzibah seemed to have lent him additional self-confidence. 'All we shall have to do then will be to use our eyes—our eyes and ears!—and then act with well-matured judgment! Our task will be easy and soon accomplished!'

'I hope that you may be right, indeed,' said Devignes, but he turned and went slowly into the house and to the shelter of his own room without further parley. The Commandant's words and manner had renewed that indefinable suspicion of the adequacy of his judgment; every fresh development of the situation only added to his growing conviction that he and he alone must be responsible for any successful conclusion. He sighed as he sat with his eyes fixed on the blank white wall in front of him, seeing not its dead surface, but a moving panorama of faces, scenes,

and incidents, all so many bits of the puzzle he had got to fit together. Two deep lines formed themselves between his eyes, and his mouth closed in a long rigid bar, while his eyelids narrowed till the eyes were but slits in his face as he gazed at his rows of little ghosts. Nobody came to disturb him, and there was not a sound in the street outside to distract his attention or recall him to a sense of time. But as the evening came on, and the sun slowly sank, the shadows creeping up somehow wove themselves into his thoughts and anxious cogitations, insensibly softening all the hard knots and angles till they seemed to melt into the misty indefinite twilight, losing their own harshness of outline in that tender mellowing. The pictures of intrigue and falsehood, of bloodshed and disloyalty, of strenuous life and troubled thought, slowly faded and dissolved, and in their place there rose but one—the picture of a rosetinted face, simple, childish, and full of the tender charm of a disposition wherein no unkind or unloving thought could find place. The frown relaxed, the lines smoothed; presently into the hard deep-set eyes came a softened gleam, and the lips parted in a half-unconscious smile. If Devignes had stepped into the circle at Lodeswell as a disturbing influence from which no one

of the lives he touched was henceforth to be free, into his own had come the one which up to that time had never been able to disturb the pool of his consciousness. For he was at that moment losing grip of diplomatic problems and his lifework in the contemplation and thought of a girl—Marie Maclean.

CHAPTER III

THE Commandant's house, which he inhabited with this one unmarried sister of his, her six pet cats, and a perennial series of young harrier pups in training for the pack which to this day is the local glory of Lodeswell, stood a little way up the road and almost opposite to the griffin-guarded gates of the Manor. It thus enjoyed a commanding position as regarded the Manor household, for though the high brick walls screened the grounds even from Miss Bullecroft's favourite attic window and post of observation, the gardendoor was in full view, and so no one could go in or out by either of the legitimate modes of entrance without the knowledge of the Little Red House, which was mainly the reason, indeed, why Jacques had long since adopted the southern hedge of the Manor garden to serve as his back door.

So on the Sunday morning, when the church bells had begun their second ten-minutes' term of ringing, which meant that it was time to start up the hill, the Commandant, with Miss Bullecroft hanging on his arm, a characteristic combination of vellow paduasoy, purple and pink streamers, artificial chrysanthemums—a scheme of colour which she explained to Devignes was meant to symbolise an autumn garden and her own advancing years—emerged from his gateway just in time to see the trio occupying all their thoughts coming out of the garden door but twenty yards ahead. Those intervening yards were soon covered. The Commandant dropped his sister's arm with scant courtesy and no apology, starting off at full speed in pursuit, while Miss Bullecroft, gathering up her skirts, pattered nimbly along in the wake of her eager brother, making no more ado even in her thin sandalled shoes of the beach-mended roadswhich, as every Sussex walker knows, mean one half-step back for every one forward—than if each stone had been a cowslip ball.

Devignes, forgotten in the chase, dropped purposely further to the rear. His great object was to glean all that he could from close personal observation without being noticed; besides which this Sunday hare-and-hounds pastime did not quite appeal to him as worthy of imitation, though amusing from a spectator's point of view. At the foot of the hill the Bullecrofts won, and

he watched with intentness bordering on the inquisitorial to see what manner of greetings they were that passed. Effusive on the part of Miss Bullecroft, graciously benign on the part of Lady Hepzibah-but, indeed, no one with such a tower of priceless fabric upon her head, the white feathers that crowned it floating over the filmy structure like the Plume of Navarre, could have lent herself, physically or mentally, to undignified exuberance. Jacques gave a salute of the most buoyant character in exchange for the icily stiff one proffered by the Commandant, and Devignes added another mark to the account against his colleague, and one to the lad in tribute. He laughed, though, to see the Commandant pressing closer and closer to Lady Hepzibah's side, and hoped that she was taking as a compliment to her face the fervent attention that was being paid to its framework! Marie, in her white frock, kept close to Jacques' side, saying never a word. Devignes noted that with a smile, though to all appearance he was quite absorbed in nonchalantly whipping off the heads of the dandelions by the way. He had an intuition that Marie would eventually be the one to supply the key to the situation he wished to solve.

His loitering brought him face to face, as he neared the church door, with Jacques abruptly

retracing his footsteps. His aunt and sister had entered with the Bullecrofts. He looked quite a different person this morning, dressed with punctilious neatness, very conventional and sedate in manner, and very bright and glowing as to complexion, while his countenance wore a most pleasing air of candour and innocence.

- 'You are not going in this morning?' observed Devignes, holding out his hand as they met, and Jacques gave his readily enough, liking the sentiment of it after their fight of the day before.
- 'Oh, I'm a Catholic!' he replied lightly. 'Of course, I mayn't go there. But I always escort my aunt and my sister. We were not brought up together,' he added, as a sort of afterthought.
- 'No?' said Devignes. 'You must find this separation in creed rather a difficulty. There's no church of your faith here, is there?'
 - 'None nearer than Hastings.'
- 'A fair ride. They oblige you to attend, too; isn't it so?'
- 'Oh, Sunday Mass, yes. I rode over this morning,' said Jacques unguardedly, flushing through his fair skin with the recollection of the unsatisfactory interview with Dangars which had supplemented his church attendance. Dangars had absolutely refused to return Lady Hepzibah's

lace under the full amount advanced *plus* fifty per cent. interest, and Jacques was at his wits' end just now devising ways and means to meet his share in the complication.

The flush did not escape Devignes, though his eyes were facing seawards.

'Well, I could envy you a morning on the downs or cliffs this weather; courtesy to mine host forbids me that indulgence, you understand! I was lying out there yesterday forenoon—a beautiful view. You must have felt anxious these last few months, though, till we got the news of Waterloo. The coast's exposed to nakedness, and your defences don't seem over practicable.'

'Oh, that's such an old story—all that,' said Jacques indifferently, his mind busy with pecuniary calculations. 'One gets accustomed to it. I never worry about the French, except to wish I were fighting them over there.' He jerked his thumb impatiently towards the Channel, and the light in his eyes died out. 'Catholic again; can't get a commission.'

'I sympathise,' said Devignes heartily, and Jacques glanced round with a quick access of friendliness. 'Perhaps—there should be means of evading that—interest and so on. If you cared to talk it over some day, I've known men in like

case—but there's the bell stopping'—Devignes broke off purposely—'we must defer it. Adieu for the while.'

He turned as if to go into the building, but stopped to step back under the shelter of a buttress and watch Jacques swinging briskly down the hill, hat in hand, his red head ablaze with sunshine, a light figure with a buoyant stride.

Devignes was watching with intent to a test.

'He goes without turning—unsuspicious, or more crafty than I think him. Ah, so! On mischief bent, then, after all.'

The foolish demon had possessed Jacques again. At the foot of the hill a reckless impulse seized him to look round just to see if he were being watched. He was on his way, in fact, to visit the wounded smugglers in hiding.

Devignes shrewdly surmised this, but did not trouble to track him just now. Such a crude method of obtaining information was not his method of procedure. With him thought invariably preceded the deed, and, never acting upon impulse, he was the more prepared to accept the fullest responsibility for whatever he decided to do.

His business in Lodeswell was of far higher

import than the mere conviction of this or that poor wretch of a Sussex smuggler, and Jacques and Marie were but pawns in a game that meant the moving of kings and queens on the board had they but known it! The knowledge would have saved them much anxiety.

Devignes watched Jacques out of sight, and then slipped quietly into the church, sitting down behind one of the squat Norman pillars, whence he could see every one in the building. The Commandant, in the seat behind Lady Hepzibah, had, he could perceive, eyes only for the Front.

To certain highly sensitive and intellectual natures it happens sometimes under certain conditions, when they themselves are overpoweringly possessed by some one dominant all-pervading emotion, that they become oddly cognisant of the exact balance of the ideas and emotions occupying the minds of the people by whom they are It is a kind of second sight, a surrounded. seventh sense, a sharpening, intense and acute, of natural instinct and intuition, which results in bestowing a temporary power of thoughtreading. It was in this strangely wrought mental condition that Devignes found himself as he sank upon his knees, and the murmur of the prayers wove itself in with the wash of the distant sea. He was a man who by nature and

deliberate training had cultivated every faculty to the utmost, and at this present moment every condition of life and thought and feeling was pressing upon him to induce a singularly vivid consciousness of the slightest vibration in the mental atmosphere about him. Every sense, every channel through which perception might travel, seemed to be opened wide.

The intermingle of voices and sea became a confused chaos of sound, from out of which there rose to him a strange realisation of the dominant thoughts and feelings of that kneeling congregation. It was a painful realisation—painful by reason of their sharp contrast to his own.

Yet he knew his intuition was correct. Outside in the great world high stakes were being played for; Europe was convulsed in a most bitter struggle; crowns were in the balance; Englishmen dying by thousands on the battlefield of the Continent, England's freedom weighing down the scales—yet it was no sort of national anxiety here that was chaining attention, sympathy, interest.

It was pitifully, contemptibly painful.

The quiet majesty of the ancient Norman building, witness to centuries of selfless thought for the welfare of the community—the beauty of the familiar words of the grand old English Liturgy, so all-embracing in its sympathy, meeting all needs and wants in its catholicity of interests what did it all mean to these worshippers?

There came to him none of that sense of selfforgetful peace which belongs to the very essence of worship itself, nor did there seem to be present even that of temporary relief from storm and stress. Merely dull apathy. Not even the indifference of despair, not even the apathy of security. It was simply that all interest was selfcentred and local.

He smiled sardonically, the natural vein of cynicism in him gaining the upper hand. What was it, after all, that had drawn him to service that morning? What was interesting the Commandant? What probably occupying Miss Bullecroft's thoughts in lieu of prayers? What Marie's? What—he could have staked his honour on the answer—those of the congregation generally, both men and women?

The plumes of Lady Hepzibah's bonnet in front of him were waving and nodding as she bent her head in sympathetic response, prayer, and praise; they quavered in unison with the 'Tate and Brady' like a bunch of aspens in a heavy gale, for she sang with emotional ardour and the intensity of spiritual conviction.

Was she unconscious of her lodestar? Was

it not a lodestar of interest, if not of envy, to half at least of the other women present? If the girl beside her was putting up prayers for guidance well, in what dilemma?

Was not that lace even now being fully recognised as an old friend by the major part of the congregation, who knew whence it came?

They were all smugglers—no secrets there! They knew the secret and source of that lace, whoever else might be ignorant. The plumes rising and falling-oh, how Lady Hepzibah enjoyed singing; all her heart and soul went into it, a legitimate outlet to every emotion—blended strangely with his questionings. He leaned back wearily in his seat and closed his eyes. Waterloo had been fought and won—how long ago? This Napoleon was—where? was the 2nd of July. No one quite knew. Down Channel the British men-o'-war were waiting on guard; all along the coast, since that fateful news from Elba, had been gathering anew the wave of terror that is terrible because it knows not exactly what or when to fear, and which for over fifteen years had been on the ebb and flow.

He knew that even now, though Waterloo was won, yet so long as the scourge of Europe was at large no real tranquility was possible. Whole families might be waiting at that very

moment, as they had waited so often before, with all their household goods ready packed, prepared to start off at a moment's signal. He himself had helped to devise the fortifications from Deal to Portsmouth. He had studied the building of the martello towers, had tested the guns planted to command Pevensey Bay, had helped to draw out the orders to be given to the troops if necessity called. Had the pulse of the nation already throbbed so high that reaction had set in before the supreme moment had come? He opened his eyes. The drone of the responses in the broad, drawling Sussex dialect mocked his own quickdriving blood, his actual knowledge of the real significance of the times.

Round about him on packed benches were the village folk—men, women, and children, old and young. All of them, he knew, were cognisant of, if not implicated in, the illicit trade which had brought about the fray of the day before; they thought more of that than of their fighting countrymen over seas. A large number of them had actually been present—some he recognised, and knew they probably recognised him. Of course the Commandant was their natural enemy. What of vengeance for dead and wounded comrades was mingling in their prayers now? He ground his teeth savagely, though he had little

indeed left to learn of the evil in human nature. Did they care what their tampering with the foreign enemy at a time of national peril might involve to the nation? Some of these women were wives, sisters, daughters of the men killed the other night; some of these children were their children. He read their hearts as if they lay like open books before him. It was the local sentiment, their own circle, lives, fortunes, that bound and circumscribed their sympathies.

And symbolised by a Bonnet.

The humour of it struck home, and then a great sigh burst from him. Was the note of a common weal quite lost?

How had it come about that loyalty to their country had so withered under the cry of self—the community swallowed up in the individual? The plot he had come to unravel was before his mental vision in all its terrible possibilities. He bowed his head in his hands as anger rose hot, and prayed for a just mind in considering this thing.

The Commandant thrust an arm through his when he caught him outside the church, pressing it significantly as they made their way through the group of loitering men and women in the churchyard.

'All of 'em our men,' he whispered, nodding

to right and left like a Chinese mandarin in response to the different acknowledgments of their presence. 'They'd sooner spit in my face. Afraid, cowed, you see.'

Devignes looked straight into one face after another. They were men of six feet, most of them, brawny and hard, with the heavy, stolid doggedness of the true South Saxon stamped all over them—and thought their respectfulness much more likely to be the outcome of easy contempt for a power they knew so well how to circumvent.

'Well?' he said, when free of possible hearers. 'Well?'

'Well?' said the Commandant. 'You saw it. Now they trick even their kind aunt! Preposterous! And, unfortunately, look as carefully as I might, the pattern is quite lost. There's not so much as one loose streamer or end! I'm no wiser than before.'

Devignes had his nerves fully strung up. The Commandant's words put the final touch. He felt desperate to have the ground clear, were it only of an incompetent colleague.

'Now, look here,' he said, stopping short, and dropping the Commandant's arm, 'let's be quite sure we're working to the same end—and to some end,' he added to himself. Then, controlling

his impatience with no small difficulty, 'Let me explain. Will you allow me to ask a few questions?'

They were just outside the gate. The Commandant faced round, looked up and down the road, planted his feet firmly and well apart on the shingle, and assumed a professional expression.

- 'You are still convinced—practically—that that identical bit of lace is the cipher-lace?'
- 'I am,' said the little Commandant stoutly.
 'And if only I could have one yard of it in my own hands one moment I'd swear to it.'
- 'Do you believe these Macleans are aware of its real significance?'

The Commandant hesitated.

- 'I would answer for Lady Hepzibah with my soul. She is—she is—well, she's—oh, 'twould be incredible!'
 - 'She's a woman,' said Devignes grimly.
- 'Yes, yes. So she is. But that's not the question.'
- 'Vain women will tamper with any sort of trick. They call it power.'

The Commandant looked at first wholly taken aback. Then he squared his shoulders, and stiffened his features. A purple flush rose slowly upon his face, whilst his eyes darkened to the colour of old oak!

'I don't care a hang about that. I've known Lady Hepzibah Deane these forty years, and I'd answer for her honour with my own. Lady Hepzibah condescend to smuggle lace, and shamelessly wear it! Nonsense! No! No!'

Devignes looked speculatively at the little, square-set man, and, unperceived, slightly shrugged his shoulders.

- 'Ah, well! Very good. Then supposing her entirely ignorant—how comes it into her possession? Mind you, we *know* practically it was to come over by some one the other night.'
- 'Bought it. Through that young Mephistopheles, very likely. He could make up any number of plausible stories—and get them believed, too. They worship him—those two!'
- 'Well, we know young Maclean was out the other night—you say he is frequently—on the smuggling boat. Do you suspect him of further complicity?'

The Commandant paused. His was an upright soul, if full of prejudice.

'I've no proof,' he said at last, with an evident effort to be impartial. 'I don't trust the boy, and it so happens that he was brought up by his Scotch-French relations, and was never here in England till a year or two ago. I told you they took him as an infant, when Lady Hepzibah

took the girl. His sympathies may very well, and even legitimately, be over seas. Still, he's got good sound blood in him, and after all his mother was a Deane, though she did run away with a rascally Jacobite of a Highlander. I can't believe the boy a deliberate traitor, but God knows what queer ideas of loyalty he may have.'

'And—er—Miss Marie believes in him implicitly, I fancy,' said Devignes. He knew better than to suggest wrongdoing in her, after having seen the Commandant's personal predilections, even supposing he would have cared to think ill of her on his own account unless positively obliged. His remembrance of her confusion the day before was just then strangely at war with his instinctive belief in her candour and with Miss Bullecroft's encomiums.

'He has an unfortunate influence,' sulkily returned the Commandant, upon whom Jacques' name always acted as a strong irritant. 'Marie Maclean is a charming girl, and extremely well brought up. I have seen that from the time she was first brought here as a baby of a fortnight old by Lady Hepzibah. If ever she does anything wrong that Papist brother of hers will be accountable.'

'Thank God, you can always count on a woman's feelings, though Heaven forbid any

reliance on their judgment,' remarked Devignes irrelevantly. 'Well, then, as the matter stands it is thus: there's a doubt, slight, but still a doubt, about that being the lace we wanted. That must be solved, and at once. Secondly, if it is the real thing, it must be traced to its right source without delay or compunction—so far as either Lady Hepzibah or her nephew and niece are concerned. Thirdly, the man who is its source we must have. Now, how do you propose to solve the first of our difficulties? Is it to be you or I?'

'Lady Hepzibah has asked us to tea this afternoon,' replied the Commandant rather pompously, for, great as was the respect he felt for the King's emissary, he liked to feel some of the reins of power were still in his hands; 'we always go in on Sunday afternoon. I will ask her direct how it came into her possession. My sister or I can do this without offence: we must not, of course, for one instant, allow it even to be supposed we have any suspicion that the lace was improperly come by. It would be an insult she would never forgive. She will tell us frankly and naturally, you will find, and then we can act by ourselves. Let that be the first step. Leave it to me.'

'Very good,' said Devignes. 'I presume you

understand the idiosyncrasies of these particular ladies, as I naturally do not. Here is Miss Bullecroft.'

'Lady Hepzibah's new bonnet,' exclaimed Miss Bullecroft, pattering up all aglow with excitement, 'is—is a dream! No, I might say a vision—a Vision. What must it be?' she sighed, as her eyes fell upon her paduasoy, dyed for the second time and even then in its sixth year, 'what must it be to feel it right to indulge one's self sometimes?'

CHAPTER IV

THE Commandant made no pretence that afternoon as regarded the informal right of way through the garden door. He observed with blunt simplicity that Lady Hepzibah generally preferred Sunday visitors to come round by the front. 'Even her oldest and most privileged friends,' explained Miss Bullecroft in a somewhat anxious aside, as they made their way to the griffinguarded gates.

'Not but what I have permission to use the other door on occasions,' added the Commandant—with quite unnecessary punctiliousness as Devignes thought, considering that, as they both knew, the top attic window of the little Red House and a field-glass had been responsible for the occasion of his last all too familiar entry, solely in the hope of catching Jacques unawares. Jacques would have burnt the Red House down to the ground had he so much as suspected that his home-coming had been overlooked in this way, and Devignes, though admitting that expediency

might necessitate an act otherwise questionable, never pretended to himself that it was thereby justified, and in any case thought it mere contemptible weakness to disclaim responsibility afterwards. He seldom vouchsafed explanations of his conduct at all, and never equivocal ones.

It occurred to him, too, that, notwithstanding the need of finding out the truth at all hazards in this present instance, the occasion would probably have been lost had Lady Hepzibah's admirer not known her to be safely elsewhere, adding to himself a bitter comment upon the folly of trying to work seriously with a man who persisted in putting any one woman out of the common category of human imperfections, when he noted the change in the Commandant's manner directly they came in sight of Lady Hepzibah and her niece.

It was the invariable custom at the Manor House to have tea on Sunday afternoons out of doors and in one particular corner of the garden, whenever the weather permitted; and the Commandant, without troubling to go up to the house, stepped aside from the coach-drive directly they were inside the gates, and, following one of the box-edged paths running off on every side, convoyed his little party straight to the plot of grass shaded by the big mulberry tree,

a green easis in the heart of the flower-beds cut in all sorts of shapes and gay with bloom, where Lady Hepzibah and Marie were already seated.

Perhaps Devignes would have been amused at the extraordinary metamorphosis the mere passing of the griffins seemed to effect with regard to his companion had he had less at heart He was not unsympathetic by and at stake. nature, but for many years his career and all that it involved had been his first and foremost object, an attitude fostered by the revolt of all that was best in him-of depth, sincerity, and the passionate desire for the realisation of the Ideal-against the atmosphere of unreality, superficial emotion, and false sentiment in which his life had for the most part been necessarily spent. He had learnt early the supreme lessons of self-control and reserve, throwing himself and his powers the more ardently into the honourable channel of work as the artificiality of the society about him became more and more self-evident and oppressive. And what he did not understand and could not sympathise with was the permitting of any lesser influence to interfere with the straight pursuit of any aim which spelt duty.

Popular as he was in the social set to which he belonged—the innermost circle of the Court of St. James—he had never so far forgotten

himself, nor his business in hand, as to lose his self-possession in the presence of any man, and certainly no woman; and though his manner and bearing towards women formed the model for all the fashion-aspiring youth of his day, there it He had never as vet come under the influence of any one of them, and least of all could he have contemplated such a catastrophe as allowing personal feeling to dominate his reason or overcome his self-command in a matter which involved the discharge of a trust. Business with him always claimed first place; no occasion in his life had ever arisen to challenge its supremacy, and, in the absence of sufficiently strong temptation, he did not perhaps wholly realise possible weakness.

To see then this sturdy little Commandant, the hero of many a fight, square, bluff, dogmatic, arbitrary as an absolute monarch in thought and speech, becoming all at once mildly deferential, stumbling and hesitating over the delivery of an opinion, dropping hat, gloves, and cane alternately, and actually forgetting his manners in the desire to emphasise them, filled him with astonished concern, especially when Lady Hepzibah, seemingly not at all disposed to set the Commandant at his ease, riveted her attention almost exclusively upon himself.

She rose and advanced a few steps to meet them in welcome, stately and gracious in black and white, a tiny square of old French lace in lieu of any disfiguring turban lightly covering her abundant if faded hair. Possibly she had never seen the Commandant in any other than this agitated mood, and so did not realise how much his manner, or want of it, implied; possibly being accustomed to his homage, before a Sunday will-o'the-wisp the light of the perennial week-day candle paled! She said herself afterwards to Marie that Mr. Devignes' charm of bearing brought back to her the days of her girlhood, when, as a toast, she had been the cynosure of London society.

It was certainly gossip of a very different sort from any heard before in Lodeswell in which these two were presently deep. Persons and places, amusements, occupations, interests—they were moving in another world for the nonce.

Poor Lady Hepzibah! It was long since she had met any one who could serve as a link with that happy past—which meant to her the past of romantic ideals, of sanguine glamour, inextinguishable hope—of life when it meant youth. It had been entirely by her own choice, and with the highest motives, that she had abandoned her position at Court and come to take up her abode in Lodeswell, there conscientiously to try and

fulfil the onerous duties, as owner of a large country property, which on the death of her only brother had fallen upon her shoulders. though, whatever she had given up, she was perfectly conscious that no other life could ever suit her now so well, still it was as a breath wafted from a Peri's Paradise to find so unexpectedly a kindred spirit with whom for one brief half-hour she might retrace her steps across the fields of time. It was like meeting with a fellow-countryman, nay, an old family friend, after years spent amongst foreigners; like coming suddenly upon a man of one's own upbringing and class, with the same traditions and instincts. after being forced by circumstances to adapt oneself to another grade of civilisation, finding a brother in a stranger, a friend in what had promised to be but the merest acquaintance.

The flush that sprang now to Lady Hepzibah's cheek, the light that glowed all at once in her eyes, the animation transfiguring voice and manner, meant this and nothing more. But, unfortunately, to the severe critic so tactfully responsive to her mood it all appeared but as another form of the vanity which the incident of the bonnet and its trimmings had convinced him was her most salient characteristic. It had seemed to him abominable that a young girl

should be set down like any overworked milliner's assistant to trim an exigeante old lady's headgear, especially when money was evidently no object; he did not know, and scarcely believed Miss Bullecroft's statements since he had really had no opportunity of understanding simple, natural, unspoilt feminine natures, that Marie's works were genuine works of love, that Lady Hepzibah adored the very ground she trod on, and that it was a real and unaffected pleasure to the girl to see her aunt attired in the results of her inventive skill. Devignes knew how to respect an obviously pious-minded and simplehearted creature like Miss Bullecroft-it was easy to see she could never have felt the temptation to be or had the opportunity of being But in spite of the admiration he frivolous. could not but feel for his present hostess, and the unaffected sincerity with which he enjoyed her conversation, he was relegating her, most unjustly, to the ranks of the women he heartily despised, even while he profited by their society.

He slipped almost insensibly into the tone of cynical badinage used as a disguise by serious-minded persons who have ideals but have learnt by experience to keep them hidden.

'Tell me,' said Lady Hepzibah, with a fleeting smile of tender reminiscence for a favourite

partner of long past dancing days, 'what has become of the charming Comte de Cavours?'

'He married an equally charming lady—Lord Northhead's second daughter. But he has had the misfortune to lose every hair off his head, and since he refuses to wear a wig in the house, she refuses to have her meals with him. It is said they no longer even remember what grace the other says—you know they were long the model, as being the most devout, couple in town. She cannot, she says, be so continually reminded that each meal may be her last by having a naked skull for ever before her eyes.'

Lady Hepzibah sighed.

'And what of dear Lady Louisa Syrett? I was her bridesmaid. Is she happy in her marriage? I lost sight of her. Is she lovely as ever? A most brilliant blonde.'

'She is always in mourning now,' said Devignes, with obvious meaning; 'sable from head to foot.'

'Her brother was my own brother's dearest friend,' replied Lady Hepzibah, ignoring, but showing by a humorous twitch of her mouth and an unconscious pat to her own natural-hued tresses, that she understood his allusion.

'He is just about to marry his fifth wife, but has become quite hypochondriacal, I hear. He has taken to midnight vigils and a hair-shirt, and says life is so uncertain.'

'And are all the Ladies Markham married? You see how entirely I am out of touch with the world!' pursued Lady Hepzibah rather pathetically. 'We were presented on the same day—Lady Sybil, Lady Jane, Lady Beatrice, and myself—how far it carries one back!'

'They are all married,' returned Devignes, 'and are still all living—though not exactly in those paths of life in which they set out. Poor Lady Sybil is in Bedlam; she was singularly miserable in her marriage. Lady Jane Thornton is—well—I am sorry to say her unbusiness-like habits have brought the Thorntons to beggary. Lady Beatrice retired to a convent some years ago. She took the veil after her husband's fatal duel, over cards, with the Prince de Lunéville.'

'You do not tell me much about my old friends that is happy,' said Lady Hepzibah, wistfully. 'And yet when I remember old Lord Markham, how conscientious and highminded he was, and so careful and proud of his daughters, I hardly understand how their marriages, which I am sure can only have been arranged with the best intentions, can have turned out so disastrously!'

'And what could you expect from good in-

tentions? We know where they serve as paving stones,' replied Devignes in his blandest and most cynical tones. At this instant, raising his eyes momentarily, he met Marie's gravely fixed upon him, as she sat between Miss Bullecroft and the Commandant. He had not been aware of a pause in their conversation which must have enabled her to hear those last few sentences of his. He rose abruptly from his seat; he was not a lad like Jacques, to change colour at any moment, but he suddenly disliked Lady Hepzibah very much.

'May I help your niece with her tea-making?' he asked with a slight bow. And then he walked straight across to Marie. He was not going to lose a moment in changing that appraisement of himself in her eyes. 'Lady Hepzibah is wearied with my foolish gossip. Take my chair, Commandant, and let me make myself useful in giving the ladies some tea,' he added.

The Commandant slipped only too quickly into the vacant chair.

- 'What a superb day!' he observed, with a ponderous attempt at gaiety.
- 'But you have told me nothing of any careers yet,' said Lady Hepzibah, ignoring his remark, and as she took her cup from Devignes' hands she glanced across at him as though anxious to con-

tinue the conversation. Devignes looked at her for a moment.

- 'Careers! But of careers what can one say?' he asked, with a complete change of manner. It became grave. 'Is one man ever in a position to define the current in another man's life?'
- 'One sees the facts, the demonstrable steps in our friends' lives—are not they careers?' urged Lady Hepzibah.
- 'And are not the real steps those that are burnt in on the inner life—brain, heart, soul? And the last shall be first. Most frequently in inverse ratio in importance to those steps the world chiefly notes? Is a career to be judged as the result of character moulding circumstances—or circumstances developing character?'
- It is terribly warm,' exclaimed the Commandant, pulling out a large bandana handkerchief. He had noted the shade of perplexity on his lady's face, and fancied that it meant annoyance, which might make a tactful interruption welcome.

Devignes, without waiting for a reply, sat down by Marie's side.

'You have a beautiful church here,' he said, simply. 'I wonder can you tell me—are there not remains of a Roman arch in the west wall of the tower, just above the present doorway?—of course the Norman work is easily identified.'

Marie assented gravely. She looked pale and subdued, disinclined for conversation. Devignes, too, was the one person of the company with whom she did not want to converse. She was wishing with all her heart that Jacques would come, and the effort to appear unconcerned was becoming a nightmare. This self-possessed man at her side, with his inscrutable manner and keen eyes, made her feel helpless before him, as though every secret must be known, and all her poor little defences at his mercy. And yet how restful his quiet presence was, what a sense of repose it brought!

Devignes was oddly conscious of this attitude of mind in her, and meantime went on talking, his one object to propitiate and soothe, while he continued to help her in her duties as teadispenser, with deft noiseless movements of his long fingers that could not but appeal to her as acceptable after the brusqueness, however affectionate and kindly, of the same attentions from the Commandant.

His interest in archæology was sincere, his knowledge sound. There was scarcely a church in England or on the Continent of any architectural note that he had not visited, and with the unfolding of this taste came out also glimpses of a nature endued with a high appreciation of the

romantic, of natural beauty for its own sake, of the ideal in art, of kinship with the poetry that is most clearly realised in the most simple of Nature's handiworks. He was making extraordinary efforts to win her confidence, had Marie but known it, and they presently reaped some reward. Insensibly the tension relaxed, a smile flashed out every now and again, and she began both to listen and reply with a return of her natural manner.

'Coming up to church this morning I met your brother,' said Devignes presently, the observation following quite naturally on what he had been saying. 'He was explaining to me why he didn't go with you—and of his difficulty for the same reason with regard to getting a commission. I hoped to meet him here to-day, we promised each other to talk it over.'

He saw a subtle change in the expression of Marie's face, a sudden return of reserve. 'Snake in the grass, she's thinking,' he said to himself, and had a foolish little hurt feeling, because he had really spoken unpremeditatedly, and was perfectly sincere in his sympathy.

'It's a matter of interest really,' he went on, however, steadily, 'and could be easily managed by any one who understood the right way. If you and your brother thought it worth while, and would care to trust his case to my hands, I think perhaps something might be done.'

Marie murmured formal thanks; she did not yet know how Jacques would regard this offer. It was almost a pity that she could neither realise its value, nor appreciate the humility with which it was made. Both offer and method would have caused considerable surprise amongst Devignes' London acquaintances.

'Is it the career you would choose for your brother?'

'He wants it—I should like it,' said Marie.
'And the war is over now.' The little triumphant note in the last words touched Devignes. He could trace so easily in her changeful and expressive countenance the quick transition of thought underlying her words—the impulse of pride felt by every woman who loves, in sending the man whose place in the world is dearer to her than her own personal feelings ungrudgingly to danger for the sake of his fair fame and glory and honour—the relief when the sacrifice is not required!

'There will be plenty of fields yet in which a good soldier may win his spurs,' he said, smiling. 'You are much to each other, is it not so?' He knew then what chord to touch. Marie's whole face warmed and lightened.

'We have only ourselves,' she said simply.

- 'Anything I could do for him, of course I would. I never had a sister,' said Devignes, and there seemed an almost wistful ring in his unemotional voice.
- 'My sister is quite sadly envious,' struck in the Commandant's rather strident tones upon the pause. 'But indeed, Lady Hepzibah, such lace was enough to stir the cupidity of the least covetous! Surely quite unique!'

It was an unexpected diversion.

Devignes shot one glance under his narrowed lids at the crimson blush that spread instantaneously over Marie's face, then leant forward in his chair.

'You will be answerable, my dear madam, for many disturbed prayers this morning, I fear.'

Lady Hepzibah looked distinctly pleased.

'I sincerely hope not, Mr. Devignes!' she replied however. 'But I am pleased that my niece's cleverness should be appreciated. She is deftness itself with her taste and fingers.'

'And in this case has had material worthy of her skill!' said Devignes, and then glanced across at the Commandant as much as to say that, the lead given, his turn came next. The Commandant, whose forte was not the skilful turning of a conversation to his own purpose,

cleared his throat nervously, but took up the cue to the best of his ability.

'My sister would be grateful—I—I mean, if you would pardon the liberty—she expressed so strong a wish to me. I should like to gratify her and myself. Would it be infringing too far to ask—where one might get some like it?'

The last sentence came shooting out like a pellet from a popgun, and the Commandant, purple in the face and breathing heavily through his nose, glanced despairingly from side to side as if meditating instant flight.

'Lace like mine, do you mean?' queried Lady Hepzibah, mildly. She only attributed the Commandant's incoherence to the very natural and proper embarrassment any gentleman would feel on approaching so delicate and purely feminine an interest, and fully appreciated too the kind-heartedness of a man who was taking it upon himself to make an awkward request in order to save a sister's feelings in case of refusal. She forgave the gaucherie in both, and smiled in her most regal way.

'Why, since you ask—though I should never have mentioned it myself—of course I will with pleasure tell you where mine came from. I cannot unfortunately promise that there may be more like it!' added she, looking from one to

the other rather archly, as though enjoying the possession of a delightful little secret—'for I made it myself!'

'Oh, Lady Hepzibah! Yourself! What exquisite enviable cleverness! Oh, could I but claim such a talent!' Both Devignes and the Commandant could have embraced the unconscious Miss Bullecroft!

'The skill of the maker and wearer of the bonnet is then equally matched,' observed Devignes, recovering himself first and almost immediately, and he made a courtly little bow first to aunt and then to niece.

Marie's face had paled from crimson to white, and then turned again to a deep scarlet. Her eyes, filled with tears upspringing in nervous terror, were fixed upon her hands locked in a hard grip under cover of the table. She sat as if petrified.

'Might I ask ——,' stammered the Commandant in a weak little voice. He seemed suddenly to have collapsed like a pin-pricked balloon. 'Might I ——?'

'It is a reminiscence of my girlhood, while being educated in the convent at Malines. I am not a Catholic, but my great-aunt was the Lady Superior,' explained Lady Hepzibah, enchanted with the evident sensation she had created. 'I've had it lying by for years, and then I gave it to my niece, and we both forgot all about it till the other day. Nothing could we find to trim my bonnet, and then I suddenly remembered it. So you may imagine what a double compliment you pay us, Mr. Devignes!'

Mr. Devignes bowed again.

'You must let us look at it more closely after such a revelation,' he said lightly. 'Pray, Miss Bullecroft, add your eloquence to my entreaties. It is long since I have had the chance of seeing anything so interesting.'

'Oh, dear Lady Hepzibah, if only we might!' echoed Miss Bullecroft, clasping her hands in a pretty attitude of entreaty.

'You would confer an inestimable privilege,' supplemented the Commandant.

'Then with pleasure!' said Lady Hepzibah, literally beaming with simple delight upon the company. 'The bonnet is only upstairs. Marie, my love, you know where. Fetch it for Miss Bullecroft to see.'

There was a scarcely perceptible pause. Then Marie rose. She looked neither at Devignes as he stepped aside to let her pass, nor at her aunt, nor at the Commandant. Her knees were trembling beneath her, she was giddy with apprehension as to what was coming. It seemed

to her as if she were caught in some horrible tight net, and these people round were aware of her misery and relentlessly pulling the cords tighter, and tighter. Oh, where was Jacques? But with that thought came another—for Jacques' sake! She bit her lip, steadied her feet, which somehow no longer seemed to belong to her, and walked away in the direction of the house, wild schemes of possible evasion coursing rapidly through her brain.

'Dear child, you walk as if you were quite lame! Is your foot still painful—surely the sting is better?'

Lady Hepzibah, following her niece's movements with the anxious eyes of a loving woman, spoke solicitously.

'It is not the sting, thank you,' said Marie mechanically. Oh, could she but cross the little bit of lawn steadily under those cruel eyes that pierced through every disguise and reach the house in safety! Just to get there—to be alone one moment only, and surely she would think of some expedient!

'Miss Marie's foot was cut very badly. So she told us yesterday,' she heard the Commandant saying—and thought how wickedly, how maliciously triumphant the poor man's voice sounded, though he, in fact, had been the one who had

honestly believed in her ingenuousness, and was speaking now in all good faith. But it served as the final straw to take from her the last shred of self-control. She put out her hands blindlytrees and grass, house and people, all seemed suddenly to be dissolving into mist, a confused kaleidoscope of moving shapes. Devignes, still standing at the tea-table, had never taken his eyes from her, and at the very moment when she stumbled was at her side. But Marie had lost consciousness almost before his arms went round her, and remembered nothing more till she came to herself to find Lady Hepzibah supporting her on the sofa in the Peacock parlour, and Devignes on his knees before her, rapidly undoing the bandages round her foot.

'It has begun to bleed again, I think,' she said, blindly struggling to sit up. Devignes put her back with a light touch, which was, nevertheless, instinct with authority and determination.

'Oh, my child, my child! What a dreadful cut! How did you do it? Why did you not tell me?' Lady Hepzibah was exclaiming, her features working with emotion, and her eyes dim with tears. Devignes, surveying her critically, began at that moment to readjust his opinion. 'You may safely trust me. I am not quite unacquainted with surgeon's work, and Doctor

Scape is not at home just now, I happen to know,' he said.

Marie heard the words as if in a dream. keep her own counsel was then to be quite easy, after all; no one was expecting her either to reply or volunteer information. She gave just one little sigh of relief, and then it was in complete silence that the deep gash across her instep was bathed and dressed and tied up. But when it was all completed, and Devignes rose from his knees, he stood still for one brief moment, looking down upon her with a curious sort of pity-pity as for a foolish child whom it is impossible to blame for its folly. And Marie, opening her eyes upon his, realised somehow, with a flash of sudden intuition. that it was simply because he understood so much that he asked so little. Lady Hepzibah left the room at that moment to make explanations to Miss Bullecroft and the Commandant, who were waiting outside. Devignes looked after her, then laid his hand over Marie's.

'However much you love him, Miss Marie,' he said—and his voice was low and very tender—'remember that you can only do us real good—you women to us men—when you keep us true to our best selves. Never lie for any one.'

He left her then without another word, going out through the open French window into the

garden. At the garden door Miss Bullecroft was making prolonged adieux to Lady Hepzibah. The Commandant had cut his short, and when Devignes came up all that remained to be seen of him was the back view of his short sturdy person striding homewards, an air of superabundant independence characteristic of every line, each step planted full and heavy and square on the slippery gravel.

Devignes and Miss Bullecroft followed meekly in his wake. Miss Bullecroft had the conversation all to herself, and it was divided between little running comments on Lady Hepzibah's kindness in promising a glimpse of the bonnet next day, and poor Marie's sad and inexplicable accident.

'I could not make out how, or when, or where the poor child could have met with so cruel a wound—but imagine Lady Hepzibah's kindness in thinking of it at such a moment—of course, I would not have dreamed of pressing the question in the midst of so sad a catastrophe, but I am to go in the first thing to-morrow, yes, immediately after breakfast if I like—how I hope dear Marie will have a good night! And not only that, but, what do you think?'

'Oh, my dear madam, my thoughts fail me,' said Devignes. There were two grim straight

lines between his eyebrows, but he protected Miss Bullecroft's skirts from a heavy cart which in passing was flinging up blobs of mud as assiduously as though he had nothing in the world to consider of more moment.

'I may copy it,' said Miss Bullecroft, her voice sinking to a whisper as if surcharged with emotion. 'And Marie will help me!'

Devignes made an inarticulate response, bitten off between his teeth as he sprang to hold open the gate swung back almost in their faces by the Commandant, and stood bareheaded to let Miss Bullecroft pass through.

'You make me forget even this!' she said impulsively, with a tremulous glance at her paduasoy, whose threadbare seams showed white in the July sunshine. She could not help feeling the contrast between her brother's neglect and Devignes' punctilious courtesy.

Devignes gave her a smile, which lit up his face with something akin to tenderness.

'You honour me by such an observation!' he replied.

The Commandant, still with his back to them, was standing in the middle of the gravelled walk, waiting as it were under protest. Devignes took no immediate notice of him, but silently piloted Miss Bullecroft with a détour over the grass to

the house door, and then, his own attitude undergoing a complete change, came straight back.

- 'And-er-well?' he said.
- 'Well?' repeated the Commandant, with a defiant and palpable attempt at diplomacy, meant to compel his adversary's confidence without imparting his own.

Devignes kept his eyes fixed on his colleague's face, but lightly flicked at the daisies with his cane.

- 'It is evidently not the cipher lace we expected, or you will agree with me that it is amazingly difficult to fathom the ways of ladies?'
- 'If you mean that I think Lady Hepzibah Deane was telling a lie, I don't,' said the Commandant bluntly. 'If she said she made that lace, she did.'
 - 'You think she made the lace?'
- 'She told me she made that lace,' reiterated the Commandant, with sullen persistency. 'So she did make it.'
- 'We are sadly out of all our reckonings then, I fear,' said Devignes, lightly, but he was scanning the Commandant closely, and any one who had ever watched him at work would have known how actively employed his brain was.
- 'Look here,' said the Commandant with a burst of abrupt anger, 'you and I don't hit it off

here. I've known Lady Hepzibah Deane, and believed in her, these forty years. I'm not going to discredit her word now just because it doesn't happen to coincide with my own fancies.'

- 'Then you maintain the position that that is not the cipher-lace?' Devignes' tone changed too.
 - 'I don't care one way or another.'
- 'Oh, come!' Devignes smiled as if at a foolish child.
 - 'Well, then—I suppose so.'
- 'And consequently no cause remains for distrust of Jacques Maclean.'
 - 'I didn't say that.'
- 'The logical conclusion. Consider the only reason why we thought him implicated.'

The Commandant was silent. Then-

- 'The lace on the bonnet can be left out of the question.'
- 'Not quite. It is the cipher-lace, or it isn't. If it is, these Macleans, aunt, niece, and nephew, are implicated—whether innocently or of their own will doesn't signify yet. And we must press it home. If not——'
 - 'My sister is to see it to-morrow.'
- 'If we've aroused suspicion,' said Devignes—he put it as problematical for the sake of the Commandant—'she will not. The bonnet she may.'

'It will be the best plan to explain it all to Lady Hepzibah,' said the Commandant. Devignes raised his eyebrows.

'Oh no, pardon me! The matter is not ours to reveal in so naïve a way,' he said with a silky intonation of voice, adding to himself with a laugh of sheer delight, 'to a woman I distrust!'

He looked the Commandant over from top to toe. unobtrusively, but with a consideration which took note of every point. He appealed to him as a sort of creature apart, a curious anomaly, worthy of highest respect, but impossible to treat as man to man. Was it credible that after forty years of active service, as, presumably, a man of affairs, mixing in the world and seeing it as it was without glamour, this high-minded and courageous soldier could now calmly propose divulging matters pertaining to the Secret Service, involving State interests of highest national import, to a frivolous talkative old lady, simply to avoid the fact that it was open to discussion whether or not she had evaded the strict truth? Small blame after all if she had, from the diplomatic standpoint that is, since it was probably merely to shield her own, or at worst to cover a retreat. Devignes was inclined to think that, supposing her to be deeply implicated, this play-acting was of the very highest order, and putting the moral side of the

question out of sight, worthy as such of some appreciation from an antagonist.

'We should defeat our object at once.'

There was a silence for some minutes.

- 'I intend to take the matter into my own hands,' resumed Devignes quietly.
 - 'You!'
- 'You will aid and abet me with your authority in all that I may choose to do in this place, Commandant. But you will, of course, recognise mine in every decision.'

The Commandant's attitude changed in a flash. He became at once the subordinate. Devignes' tone had put the matter, in an instant, upon another footing, and one which as a disciplined soldier he understood. Devignes asserting his rights as the superior officer entitled to take the lead, and have his commands unquestioningly obeyed, cleared the entire position.

'Of course,' he repeated gravely.

There was another pause, during which it was the Commandant's turn to stand scrutinising Devignes' face, which, turned towards the south, his eyes on the distant horizon line where sea touched sky, bore that look of abstraction which means that every faculty is absorbed in concentrated thought.

Presently he spoke.

THE BONNET CONSPIRATORS

'You will instruct your men to be in readiness at any hour. It will be necessary to make a few arrests. I needn't add, of course, that the strictest secrecy is to be observed. In the course of half an hour or so I will speak to you again.'

He took no notice of the expression of dismay, instantly schooled into that of submission to discipline, that came over the Commandant's face, and turning abruptly went out at the little gate, while the Commandant, glued as if by magic to the spot, dully watched him making rapid way seawards.

CHAPTER V

'MARIE! Asleep?'

Marie started up. She had not really been to sleep at all, though Lady Hepzibah had tucked her up in bed and left her five hours before, and each time since, when, shading the candle with her hand, her aunt had peeped solicitously in, she had appeared to be wrapped in soundest slumber. with eyes shut, and nothing but a tangled mass of hair visible. But it was only a poor little feint in self-defence, for she was awake and restless as soon as ever the door had closed again. tears were hardly dry upon her cheek before some fresh sting of memory made them start again. Each stroke of the big church clock, as hour after hour went by, seemed to sound the knell of some hope, to foretell some horrid catastrophe. Sleep? No!

'You must wake up anyhow. Don't be afraid. It's only I, dear.'

It was Jacques. He held a little dark lantern in one hand, letting its rays travel slowly round

the room lest they should blind Marie's presumably sleep-filled eyes.

Jacques always thought of these little things, and it was perhaps one reason why so many grave faults were easily forgiven him.

'Jacques! Oh, how glad I am!'

Jacques, at that, insinuated a little more of a very travel-stained person round the door, stepping cautiously in stockinged feet. He shut it behind him very gently, hardly daring to let the handle go, and paused to listen a moment or two in breathless suspense; then tiptoeing like a cat across the bare polished boards, he sat himself down in a contented heap on the foot of Marie's bed, and opened the door of his lantern wide.

'Twelve o'clock, and a dullish morning,' he quoted in a squeaky monotone, hardly above his breath. 'Lord, I'm tired!' He yawned unrestrainedly, and was just about to burst out with some further exclamation, when he caught sight of Marie's face full in the light. 'Anything wrong, Moll? Tired or—been crying, haven't you?'

Marie pulled herself round and buried her swollen and disfigured countenance in the pillow.

'Oh, Jacques, it's been an awful afternoon!'

Jacques' face—white and deeply scored with anxious lines as it was, the heavy black rings

round his eyes giving him the appearance in that flickering light of being at least forty years old—became instantly filled with sympathy, though darkening also the next moment with quick apprehension.

He huddled a little closer to the bed.

'Oh, you just tell me all about it, Moll! It'll be all right, you'll find! Then I'll tell you my day. Mine's better news—on the whole,' he added to himself, his cheerful optimism requiring on second thoughts a postscript.

Marie, in smothered gasps from her pillow, recounted the adventures of the day. Jacques listened attentively till she had done.

'But was your foot hurt?' he asked with a ring of genuine anxiety in his voice. 'You only just let them think so, didn't you, to prevent questions? No wonder the old master fox was annoyed—but I don't understand why Devignes——'

'Oh, Jacques, it was cut, it was honestly bleeding! And it did hurt so badly too. It was walking on it. I only cut it just after lunch—just when I knew they were coming. Aunt Hepzibah never told me in the morning she'd asked them. And I knew they'd bring it up somehow, and then she would find out, and you weren't home, and I was all alone—and I think the bandage slipped—that was really why I fainted.'

- 'You did it yourself? I don't understand,' said Jacques bluntly.
- 'Oh, Jacques!' cried Marie, bounding up in the bed, and letting him see, with dismay too, how completely her wretchedness had overwhelmed her, 'I had to make it true! It made it less like a lie even if I did do it on purpose. Only when I began with the knife it was so—so—it didn't really hurt much, only I had to keep my head turned away, and the knife went deeper than I meant it to. Then I bandaged it up—only it bled so fast it made me feel ill.'

Jacques was silent. He was gazing openmouthed and wide-eyed.

'And then Mr. Devignes bound it up. So he'll think something was true, won't he? He'll know I wasn't altogether telling a lie,' added Marie wistfully. 'Oh, Jacques, do say something!'

Jacques instead sprang restlessly to his feet.

'But Devignes! Why, Molly, it would only just make him more suspicious! Don't you see, no one could mistake the two things—no one knowing anything of doctoring, besides. That lace got stained when it was wrapped round the Frenchy—a shot in the lungs isn't the least the same as a cut on a foot—and a cut just made! Why, the blood on the lace was dry, quite brown! He couldn't help seeing you'd only just cut the

skin. Oh, Marie, Marie! If he never had proof before, he'd guess now! Of course girls are no good at this kind of thing—no, Marie, darling, don't cry, I meant they're much, much too good. Anyhow, it doesn't matter. And it was splendid of you!'

'I meant so well!' sobbed Marie.

Jacques was very consoling. He never wasted the time which might be spent in repairing the mischief in idle regrets. He put his curly head down on the pillow beside his sister's, and slipped a caressing arm under her neck, hugging and coaxing and laughing by turns, while he dabbed at all he could see of her face with a rag of a pocket-handkerchief wound up tight in a hard little ball, which he extracted from a pocket full of nails, string, and many odds and ends.

'I wish I'd been home,' was all he said. 'It's my fault. I'd no business to drag you in. Don't cry, dear.'

Marie, who cared for nothing now she was no longer left unsupported, sat up, became conscious of the handkerchief, and began to laugh in her turn.

'Oh, Jacques, it's all oily! It's a gun rag!'

'Isn't it clean? Does it smell? 'Pon my honour it does! So sorry!'

Jacques sniffed at the rejected comforter, and threw it away with a gesture of disgust. 'Never mind, I like it. I'm well now.'

Jacques took away his arm, heaved a heavy sigh, and pulled himself up into a sitting posture, gazing with a comically paternal air of solicitude at his sister.

- 'You are sure?'
- 'Quite.'

Jacques heaved another sigh of relief, and looked around the room.

- 'Marie, I'm famished.'
- 'Try the cupboard,' said Marie, succinctly, nodding towards a far corner.

It was merely another hiding-place for illicit provisions, and Jacques, after exploring under the difficulties of obscure light, slippery floor, and stiff cupboard handles, returned to his post at the foot of the bed, munching as he sat, a sandwich in either hand. Marie, hugging herself in bed with her knees drawn up to her face and her hands clasped round them, shook back her hair and watched him affectionately.

- 'What I came to say,' said Jacques presently, 'was that I've got the lace back!'
 - 'Oh!'
- 'It's only on conditions, though. I don't think much of Dangars, by the way—he strikes mean bargains. He stood out for 75l.—likely sum for one to have, wasn't it? That was early this

morning. Then while you were praying and keeping guard over the Bonnet I went round to some of the people concerned and tried to borrow from them. Of course I couldn't tell what it was for, I couldn't let Aunt Hep's name be dragged in, but they'd have lent it willingly, only no one had got a sou. Then I thought Γd bargain. So back I rode, and there I've been till just now. He was in a happier mood this afternoon. talked a little to Mrs. Dangars, and we all had dinner together—in the back parlour to the shop, figurez-vous! The old lady has always thought me rather pleasant since I doctored her cat in a fit, and Dangars was frightened out of his life. And I put her up as a toast, 'twas in the best champagne too, of course, and after that business was easier! She twists him round her finger. So we arranged that I might take the lace on condition of an exchange—Frenchy's, you know, he can redeem it from there when he likes. the convenience to us will do to pay for his keep and board and doctor's bill. So I've got it!'

- 'Oh, Jacques!' Marie stretched out two eager hands, like a mother for a long-lost child.
- 'The only thing is,' went on Jacques, his head meditatively on one side, 'I promised he should have it by return. I said I'd ride in and be there by six.'

He met Marie's eyes squarely. She threw back her head with a superb gesture of self-confidence.

- 'I can do it!'
- 'It will save our position all round. To-morrow morning, you say, Miss Bullecroft's coming on inspection? Splendid! I am sorry, Marie, but if you could——'

Marie held up one hand.

- 'It would take me an hour, I should think—but, oh, Jacques, if it were ten I'd do it!'
- 'I won't miss the séance to-morrow morning whatever happens! Whew for the ferrets!' and Jacques rubbed his hands with anticipatory glee at his foes' discomfiture. 'Where is the bonnet, by the way?'
- 'In aunt's room,' said Marie with a sudden drop in her voice. 'Oh, Jacques, but how can we get it.'
- 'I'm afraid if she woke up and saw me she'd think I was a burglar,' said Jacques, meditatively, 'or I'd go. But look here, Molly, I must just go and see that my horse is safe. I tied him up with a feed, but only just by the southern hedge, and there may be bogies about. We are never safe from these prying dogs. Meantime you get the bonnet—Aunt Hep sleeps very soundly, and she wouldn't be frightened at you even if she did

happen to wake. You go, and I'll be back in five minutes.'

He slid gently from the bed, took up his lantern, and with a parting nod of good comrade-ship disappeared noiselessly. Marie slipped on a dressing-gown, and went to her aunt's room.

The passage was long, cold, bare, and polished, and the moonlight through the latticed and uncurtained windows made delicious pools of light at intervals adown the way. Lady Hepzibah's room door stood ajar; she slept heavily, and had been anxious to hear should her niece be in pain and call her. The sound of her regular breathing came distinctly through to Marie shivering in her pink cotton dressing-gown, though as much from excitement as cold on that warm July midnight.

In she crept. The window was open, and the blind halfway down flapped gently to and fro in a little monotonous lullaby as the early morning breeze stirred it. The moonlight came streaming in, and its rays fell full on an object looming white as a sculptured Patience on a monument. Just opposite Lady Hepzibah, at the foot of the bed, placed so that her last and her earliest glance must fall thereon, was set a tall pedestal, made of woven wire and glittering like a skeleton on fire. Its crowning apex was the bonnet.

Marie crept forward on hands and knees, rose on tiptoe, and stretched out eager tremulous hands—it was off—hers—Lady Hepzibah moaned, stirred, and awoke. Down on her knees, hidden under the valance, dropped the thief.

She could hear a murmuring above her, the scratch, scratching of tinder and flint, and then from without the door came a prolonged miau-u-u, pronounced and clear, and the scratching ceased.

'Oh, it's only the cat,' Marie heard Lady Hepzibah say in relieved tones, and it seemed as though she fell back again on her pillows, while under cover of a succession of plaintive miau-u-s that woke the echoes of the room, Marie slipped safely out.

'Blessed be pussies,' said Jacques devoutly, as he saluted her with a kiss outside. 'Got her? What would you do as a conspirator without my inventive genius, my dear?' And he gave one prolonged farewell mia-u-u-u as he hurried her down the passage.

It was past one o'clock, but by two Marie's task was done. She worked sitting by the window, while Jacques, in a heavy sleep of thorough exhaustion, lay prone, snugly wrapped in his long driving coat, on the outside of her deserted bed. He roused up at her touch, with

the fresh sweetness of the child, yawned, stretched himself, and gazed meditatively first at the facsimile bonnet lying on one side of Marie's chair, and then at the heap of lace she was again busy winding upon the bale.

'I hope Madame will like the change,' said he, picking up the bonnet, and pirouetting to the mirror. 'Si l'on n'a pas ce que l'on aime, il faut aimer ce que l'on a!' And placing it jauntily on his towzled mop of red curls, he made several delighted grimaces at himself.

'I wish I were a woman,' he added with a sigh. 'Fancy wearing such nice things as a right. Now, Marie, I must be off. Good-bye, sweetheart, you're worth your weight in gold. If I'm not in to breakfast remember I've toothache. Go to bed now and sleep well.'

Marie was much too wide awake to be able to follow his advice, though whether it was the throbbing in her foot, or the strain, just a little beyond her powers of control, of the previous twenty-four hours, or that vague uneasy presentiment of a coming danger we all know and which cannot be gainsaid or explained, at any rate sleep had forsaken her.

She went down to see Jacques off, the two making their stealthy way through the long empty

passages of the unoccupied right wing of the house, to where in an angle between two outstanding buttresses was the little door, forgotten by every one else so long had it been out of common use, that Jacques had discovered one day and promptly appropriated as his means of private exit and entrance. It opened to the south-west corner, and upon a walk of cypress hedges and yew trees which ran close up to the house on that side, running down to the extreme limit of the grounds. It was a walk little frequented on account of its gloomy sunlessness, but Jacques had found it very useful. It was easy to skirt through under the dark shadows unperceived, and so gain that southern outlet by the hedge where now the horse stood tethered.

Marie watched the two slowly and cautiously picking their way from one covert to another till they reached the little wood from which it was easy unperceived to regain the Hastings road, and Jacques could mount and ride boldly. Then she slowly returned, and tried at first to lie down and rest. It was impossible. Despite her wakeful night, restlessness, vivid, uncontrollable, nervous, had her in an irresistible grip. She decided to dress, and then sat down by the window, flinging its lattice wide. Her room looked to the east, and the mist mantle of the

fleeting night was but slowly, slowly lifting. Close at her right hand came the dear consoling monotone, never-wearying in its desire to sooth and heal, of the waves when they first leave the hard shingle and wash over the sands on their outgoing journey. Whatever they may say at any other times, then they are always of the same gentle mood and mind, their song is of regret and farewell, and of hope and promise to return.

And presently rose dimly out of the broken shadows fitful gleams of water shimmering and paling alternately as the moon vainly tried to withstand, and then hid her face and retreated before the brightening day.

Marie was content.

And after a little while, there, before her, day began to show itself plainly, and as she watched, her head laid on her folded arms, her eyes absorbed in contemplation of the outer world, so full of contrast in its plenitude of varying life and strangely stern simplicity, the sky quavered and broke before the first onrush of the morning. Dawn with its thrill of returning power unrolled itself slowly, its passionate glow repeated in the myriads of rose-coloured mirrors hung trembling on each dew-laden blade of grass, and leaf, and branch, its quick vivid shafts of brilliant colour tracing meteor-like paths across the very heart of

the sky, its outlying fringes of transparent yellow and pale pink and faint iridescent purples just tinging the soft dull shadows that wrapped heaven and earth, like some nun, in a mysterious veil of grey.

And Marie's thoughts slipped away from anxiety, from responsibility, from anticipation of evil. She was seeing again the look she had met when the narrow-lidded eyes had opened full. She smiled then, her grey eyes, opened wide against that scroll of day's unfolding, catching somehow something of its own mystery of depth and colour and light as she faced it, and laughed to herself under her breath—a little laugh with a catch almost like a sob in it—laughed out of sheer contentment of heart, as when suddenly realising the possession of a treasure that is quite one's own, which no one else suspects that one has got, and which is certainly never going to be shown to any one!

In the heart of that mysterious unfolding of the new day, vivid with promises, variable only in that each crescent wave of light held but greater beauty, more full of delicate gradations of colour and quivering shades, the play of a thousand sweet-fibred emotions, she seemed to see that other world which had, in one flash, opened itself out before her when those narrow-lidded eyes had lifted, and she had seen herself mirrored in their deep wells of clear light where, as the conviction of instinct told her, truth sat enthroned—truth, honesty, and the uprightness which could bear no deviation from the right path in others, and, seeing it in her, had condemned. Yet that very sternness held out security and protection. Abased indeed had she felt beneath his searching scrutiny, withal dimly realising, in her childish way, the great truth that rightful judgment never wholly condemns, and is in reality a more sure comfort for a repentant wrong-doer than blind condensation.

Marie looked at her treasure, and then fled from the thought of what the coming days might be bringing her for its fulfilment. Even in the deep silence and solitude it seemed desecration, and impulsively she put up her hands to her face to hide the warmth creeping up and up—almost as the warmth of the day's new life was blossoming like roses in the sky opposite. The shadows were dissolving and lightening all round so fast that those thrown across the house by the big elms upstanding between the east and Marie's line of sight were become deeper and blacker, as much by way of contrast as the natural result of the gradually strengthening light. And presently out of the deepest came one that moved, the

shadow of a human figure, slowly creeping up till beneath her very window, where it remained as if irresolute, unwilling to retreat, yet afraid to go any further forward. A pebble underfoot slipped, and the sound roused Marie from her dreamland with a start. She remained motionless, holding her breath for the moment, scarcely daring even to draw it; then courage and good sense prevailed. She leant farther out, and the figure, evidently interpreting her movement as a signal, drew cautiously nearer. It was Jacques, of course, she reassured herself, trying to attract her attention without risking detection by a call or whistle. The window was only one story from the ground. Marie bent as far forward as she safely could, curved her hands round her mouth, and whispered down through them as loudly as she dared:

'Jacques! How soon you've got back!'

But the shadow put up one hand as if in deprecation, and moved a step in.

' Miss Maclean?'

It was not Jacques' voice, and the sudden shock at hearing strange masculine accents sent Marie's terrors crowding back. She paused one moment, her heart beating to suffocation, then, though her lips were dry, found words.

'It is I,' she said, 'speak softly, but it is safe—no one else is anywhere near.'

- 'It's Drury,' went on the voice, and Marie, catching then a dim outline, recognised with unspeakable relief both bearing and tone as well as name. It was Dr. Scape's body-servant, a man who had been mixed up with him and Jacques and all the smuggling raids generally for years.
 - 'What is it, Drury? My brother?'
- 'Come down,' thrilled back the hoarse whisper, strenuous as if with some frightfully conflicting feeling. 'Can you come down? It's life or death—not to Mr. Maclean, I came to find him,' he added hastily, perhaps catching the whiteness of Marie's face above him. She saw his, and agitation vanished.
 - 'The south-west door,' she whispered.

There was no time for thought or conjecture, and the events multiplying so rapidly upon each other of the past twenty-four hours had left her strung up to a state of mind in which nothing seemed too strange to happen, nothing too big to accomplish, and decisive action merely the natural impulse to be obeyed. To the quick resourcefulness of Jacques the sister added her own docility of nature that never hesitated, or questioned why in face of a demand. She seemed instinctively to know what to do. Her eyes fell on the big dark driving coat hanging, just as Jacques had

thrown it from off him, on the rail of the bed. It was hooded and warmly lined, reaching to her feet, a defence against detection as well as possible bad weather. In a moment she had slipped it on.

She stopped only to throw one rapid glance round the room—what else might be useful—necessary?

A moment, and she caught sight of Jacques' riding-gloves left on the table; they recalled the day he had first taught her how to handle a pistol, and had made her put on his gloves in case it kicked. He had insisted on her learning how to use it, and had not only given her one for her own, but had commanded her to keep it loaded ready for emergencies and always close at hand. She hastily extracted it now from its case, slipped it into her deep coat pocket, and then crept noiselessly out, and down to the little side-door.

Drury was waiting outside. He was a small lithe man, young and alert-looking; too lithe, indeed, to be truly of the Sussex folk. Celtic blood had given him quickness and vitality, and he had been brought up abroad. He spoke good English, too, with no touch of dialect, or even foreign accent. Jacques and Dr. Scape were responsible for that, for the man was companion-

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able and they had treated him more as a friend than as a servant. Exceptionally well-informed, and naturally refined, his cosmopolitan experience had made of him a particularly useful attendant to a man of Dr. Scape's varied tastes and requirements.

It was just the combination of qualities the doctor needed, in touch with the Sussex folk, and with the cosmopolitan element in which he delighted, while all the softer qualities of the man had long since merged in a passionate attachment to the interest and welfare of his master. Wholly foreign, he would never have been received in confidence by the Sussex people; wholly Sussex, out of sympathy must he have been from the first with every other element that went to make up the doctor's life.

'They've arrested my master, Dr. Scape,' he burst out; 'I've come direct to Mr. Jacques. Where can I find him? He answers no signals in his room. They took the doctor on the road from Bourne—he had ridden over yesterday. I got off.'

He paused, his eves riveted on Marie, and rubbing his hands together with quick nervous gestures.

'Oh, Mr. Maclean is not here, Drury! He has gone to Hastings.'

Drury gave an inarticulate exclamation, and threw out his hands distractedly.

'Then God help us! We're done. Miss Marie, it's the Frenchy. He's in yonder;' jerking his thumb over his shoulder. 'I met one man—went all round to warn them—they've rushed round now to our house to seize all evidence before the men who've nabbed the master can come up. 'Twas only by a miscarriage—we met one lot, and knocked 'em out—the house wasn't surrounded by the Revenues same time they took the Doctor. Wanted to keep it quiet as possible, I suppose. But time's precious, Miss Marie.' He hesitated, and passed his hand over his forehead. It seemed as though he dared not tell her what was in his mind—struck, perhaps, with the childishness of her aspect.

'Will you come? It may save him. They mean to murder him else—I came away at once, I knew they would stop for Mr. Jacques. They swear they'll leave no evidence!' He blurted it out in short hard sentences, and in the growing light Marie saw his face pallid as that of a corpse, his two eyes like two coals, glittering black and bright, and every muscle twitching nervously.

- 'Murder him!'
- 'The Frenchman.'

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- 'Our men? The smugglers?' Marie drew in her breath sharply between closed teeth.
- 'They won't be caught,' repeated Drury, doggedly. 'They swear they won't.'

'Take me at once, at once, Drury.'

His face lit as if by a flash of lightning—he clutched her hand. 'God bless you, Miss Marie! Pardon—I must lead. This way, quick!'

CHAPTER VI

THE doctor's house stood at the extreme western fringe of the village, isolated from all but the Manor House, whose grounds reached for a mile on that side right down to the sea, and was built on the slope of heather-common just above the line where the cliffs stretched out in a wide expanse of close-cropped turf.

A long, low, rambling, one-storied building of dazzling white stone, it had served as friendly beacon, danger signal, and house of refuge time out of mind, whether to boats at sea, or men—hunted men—on land.

Dr. Scape was extremely popular amongst the Sussex folk in those parts, and his house no less so. Not that he sheltered aught but wounded fellow-creatures—that was merely professional, he said; were not all requiring his skill entitled to it, never mind how they came by their hurt? Nor had he himself ever actually joined in or abetted a smuggling foray. But, as he truly

observed, if he was not content to be paid in kind he would risk never being paid at all, and who was he to sneer at having the best brandy and champagne and cigars anywhere along the coast? Was he for that to refuse his medical aid altogether? Not he.

'I've known something of what happened since the '45,' he would say, with so broad a Gaelic accent that every one knew not only that his name must have been changed since that time, but that probably there had been more than one good reason for it. The Commandant, indeed, being very angry one day, swore roundly that, of course, no one but a beggarly Celt of a rascally cattle-lifting MacGregor could have such morals and boast of them, whereupon Dr. Scape had grinned complacently, so little displeased at the accusation that it indeed seemed as though he must be proud of it.

'And when ye're skulking in the Hielands it's no asking ye will be where your eating comes from! Say your grace before, man, and tip till ye see the bit glass at the bottom, and then return thanks if the liquor pleases ye.'

He served his champagne in pewter pint-pots, and kept five penniless nieces in the far north—the glory of Dumfriesshire society for the remarkable number of changes in their silk frocks.

of hue and texture not procurable in those parts for love or money, and lace whose worth, when eventually they died, set up their one heir as a laird. Ginger-whiskered, red-faced, small and spare was the doctor, invariably dressed to match in a sandy suit, with yellow leggings and bright plaid neckcloth. His legs curved outward like a bow when he stood, from being so seldom out of the saddle. With a coat weighed down by gigantic pockets full of surgical instruments on the one side of him, a Bible and notebook on the other. vou might see him scouring the countryside by night as by day, giving his skill where it was wanted with no questions-and generally no feeasked, and his religious instruction without waiting to ask or be asked; and in the interim sitting square on his horse, a very part of himself. iotting down in his notebook any quaint phrase, amusing story, incident, or touch of human nature that he might chance to come across in his manysided intercourse with humanity.

'They have not hurt the doctor?' gasped Marie.

Drury had her gripped by the sleeve, as they sped down between the thick high cypress hedges. He threw back a 'No' between set teeth, for the man was physically exhausted before ever

he had reached the Manor House, and the way was full of difficulties that might well have taxed any one with fresh untried energies. Overhead the yew-trees met; even in the height of noontide it was never more than twilight between them. Now it was black as midnight, and even while serving as a defence the darkness added dangers. The way was seldom used, and the ground left uncultivated; gnarled roots threw up skeletons hard and unyielding across the path, and every now and again Drury would slip upon some mass of half-decaying fungi, or Marie stumble against moss-grown half-embedded boulders. The heaps of rotting leaves, left autumn after autumn to fall and moulder as they pleased, caught their flying footsteps like fowlers' nets spread purposely; and the damp, dank smell of the under-layers, so long undisturbed, rose up heavy and depressing, like evil omens ripe for fulfilment. Marie shivered as a great bat, out of the many fluttering aimlessly about her, whirred soft and pulpy against her face, and then with its own curious frightened wail bounded off at the contact, a soft irresponsible ball. She could hear Drury's panting breath as he dragged her on, pushing away the brushwood and hanging briers as best he might; every now and then she caught the sound of the whisk of some branch as it whipped back again across his

face, though never a word or sound of pain escaped him.

They came out presently at the south-west corner, which was the nearest point to the doctor's house, and although the sun was not yet up, it was fully light. Before them stretched a half-mile of common, its gorse-covered surface only broken by groups of pines, all crookedly slanting one way, and branchless on one side from the constant sweep of the sou'-west gales up Channel. Their goal, white as a painted winning-post, stood out clearly defined against the sky slowly warming to life.

And then Drury dropped Marie's hand, and turned and faced her.

- 'Oh, God forgive me, Miss Marie! How dare I ask you to come? What will Mr. Jacques say?'
 - 'I insist on coming. Lead on.'
- 'It's rough—not fit—but it's a man's life. You know you're safe with me—with them all! I wouldn't ask it else.'
 - 'Lead on,' repeated Marie.
- 'I've tended that man, I've known him before, I care for him. I can't see him murdered in cold blood. The doctor would never forgive me. They won't mind me, or any one of their own sort. I came for Mr. Jacques—they'd follow him.'

'Don't waste more time, my good Drury,' said Marie. The man was hurtling out his phrases, the light in his eyes was luridly bright, and his breath came in gasps which it hurt her to hear. 'I'm ready, and not afraid. You were right to come. I take my brother's place. Now show me the shortest way.' She spoke with authority, calmly, and smiled at him, frightened though she was, relieved to see how the tension of his features relaxed as he watched her narrowly, searchingly, as if to tear the truth from her. She feared in that moment for his sanity.

'I-I'm unstrung,' he muttered between his teeth. 'We had a fight, and I've ridden overhard, maybe.' Then he wheeled round as if ashamed of his own weakness, and with a swift gesture struck, with the certainty of perfect familiarity, into a byway amongst the thickgrowing gorse. Shoulder-high it grew, and except that their feet met with no obstruction there did not appear to be any path. But above Marie's knees the prickles met and clung, and she presently found herself making her way simply by means of mechanical fighting. Drury went first, doing his best to clear the way for her, cutting and plunging, sword in hand, as though in a fever of despair, and however it might have been at any other time, the exaltation of the moment prevented Marie's feeling fatigue or discouragement; she was infected by the desperation of his mood.

They were nearing the house when Drury stopped with an abrupt gesture.

'We go underground,' he said briefly, and dropped all at once upon his knees. stooping, saw the gorse was cut away here from underneath and hollowed out like a tunnel, so that from above nothing unusual could be seen or suspected. At her feet the path was scooped out, and sloped down as though it had been the bed of a dried-up river. The opening was just large enough for one person at a time to creep down on hands and knees. Drury plunged forward, and A few yards, and the path Marie followed. dipped deeper and deeper, until there was room presently to stand upright. Drury rose to his feet and gave Marie his hand to help her from her knees, then went silently on. It was not quite dark, but the light could only filter through faintly in criss-cross patches, until all at once Marie's feet struck something hard, and even the faint light ceased. She stooped, and felt that the road was now paved with stone or some firm substance, and putting up her hand met with unyielding walls above and around her. She heard Drury, walking quickly ahead, pause and strike tinder and flint. In another moment the

place was illumined, and she saw that they were hurrying down a brick-lined circular tunnel, some six feet high, with just room for perhaps three men to walk abreast.

Drury put a light to a torch stuck in a crevice high up the wall, and as he sped along, and they passed others fixed at regular intervals all down the way, he held his match to each in turn, leaving behind them, as Marie glanced back over her shoulder, a glittering line like the tail of a comet.

Once as he paused he glanced at his watch and spoke:

'We must run. Will you?'

Marie nodded. Neither had strength for more than the actual words necessary. For her, thought seemed deadened. She looked, and acted—reason lay numbed. He set off at full speed as if he had quite forgotten her, and then stopped with a quick turn.

'Will you mind my going ahead? I must warn them you are here—it may save '—he started wildly off again, and, rounding a curve, disappeared from sight. She gathered up her skirts and tore blindly after him, her eyes following only the path at her feet, attention, energy, every faculty, concentrated in keeping up the mad race.

She scarcely perceived that she was now going

uphill, but all at once rounding a corner, she tumbled into a brilliant circle of light and against a number of burly forms. . . . Blinded, trembling, and breathless, for the moment everything swam round.

Then she heard Drury's voice. He had seized her firmly above the elbow, and some one pressed a glass to her lips. But in that instant the scene cleared. In one flash she realised that the crisis had come—that on her and on her decisive action now rested the fate of not one but many lives; and not only lives, but the honour of the living. It needed but this touchstone, and the natural weakness of the child and woman was overcome.

Upright she stood, controlled and self-possessed. She shook off Drury's hand, pushed the glass deliberately away, and faced round. If her knees shook and her lips were dry, her voice and eyes were steady.

She looked about her. It was a long, low, barnlike place, with no windows visible, save a small skylight in the centre. But the shadows were still heavy in the far corners, for the light of day that came through was extinguished by that of the flaring torches stuck in a cluster together close to the entrance, and the brilliant circle of illumination they made reached only three quarters down the room.

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She caught the dim outline of a mattress on the floor in the most distant corner of all, whereon an indistinguishable form appeared to be vaguely tossing. The group of men into which she had so recklessly plunged had withdrawn so that they stood between. She looked at them fearlessly. There was not a single unfamiliar face amongst them all.

'Daw-Green—Thwaites—you will know I come as a friend to you all. I come to represent Mr. Maclean.'

Nobody stirred or answered.

'Drury warned us of danger—that the doctor was arrested. Mr. Maclean was out, and I have come to do what I can. You may trust me, of course, as you do him.'

''Tain't no place for you.'

The man who spoke, spoke gruffly. But there was that in his tones which acknowledged her presence as, if not acceptable, at least justified.

It was curious how through all her childishness the unconscious assertion of authority thrilled in Marie's tones.

'If it is danger that affects us all, it's as much a place for me, as representing my brother in the matter, as for any of your kith or kin, Thwaites,' she replied steadily. 'Where is the Frenchman—the wounded man?' The Preventive Officer may

be here at any moment. Is it safe to move him?'

'Not alive, mistress. Nor safe to leave him either,' he muttered, but so low that none heard him but Drury.

There was a movement amidst the group—some of the torches fell down and went out. Thwaites stepped a foot or two forward and placed himself directly barring Marie's path. She tried to peer past him, to pierce the mysteries of those shadows in the suddenly darkened room, but only became conscious of moving figures and a great shuffling of feet.

Drury touched her elbow. He was standing close behind.

'Speak out at once, for God's sake, or it's too late,' came his agonised whisper.

Marie started.

'He must be saved at all hazards. . . . Thwaites, you hear me. Now understand. Get him safely away from here now, at once, and we, Mr. Maclean and myself, will be responsible. But if anything happens to him we shall hold you all accountable, and I sha'n't hesitate to give the alarm.'

'And where would you have us to take him?'
Why Marie thought it she did not know—
perhaps it was the over-respectful tone that sug-

gested something of mockery—but a conviction of what that moment held of terrible import leapt full-fledged into her mind. With a spring forward she eluded Thwaites' arm, outstretched to bar her way. What were they doing!

'Thwaites, what is it? What do you mean to do?'

'Get away from here as soon as we can,' said the man, grinning, and he threw himself back several paces so that his burly form still intervened between her and those restless vague outlines of flitting human beings.

Marie met his eyes, and, for the first time in her life, read for herself what depths of brutal passion—reckless, selfish, wholly uncontrolled, belonging to the wild beast—desperation may reveal. She gasped, with an inward shudder of recoil from head to foot. Then she collected all her self-possession, and spoke with slow deliberation.

'Now, Thwaites, listen to me. It's as much my object as yours, for my brother's sake, as you must know, to screen all this.' She made an indefinite movement of her hand. 'This man, for the doctor's sake, for your sake, for all our sakes, must be saved. Undertake with those men to get him away now, by this secret way, anywhere for just this one day, and to-morrow night, so

soon as ever it's dark, he shall come to the Manor. No one shall know, we'll nurse him ourselves, and rid you of all responsibility whether he's found there or not. Come, promise me.'

Her words were calm, though to herself it sounded as though they were muffled and choked, so fast and thickly was her heart throbbing within her.

But she kept her eyes steadily fixed upon Thwaites, and meeting his as she paused, she thought she detected a momentary softening in their ferocious expression.

She put out her hand and lightly touched his arm.

'Thwaites, you're a husband and a father—for the sake of your wife and children have pity on a man who may be loved by some one as you are by them. It's ill recalling old deeds, but when I came to nurse your little baby with fever, you said to me then you would owe me a life. Is it much I'm asking of you?'

And then for a moment she covered her face with her hand almost in shame. Well did she know in what reverence and affection her aunt and herself were held. Was it right, delicate, maidenly, to trade upon such love, so won by kindly deeds as soon forgotten as done, even in such a cause? In the dead lifeless pause there

came a moan from that far corner. She dropped her hands again.

'Thwaites—you wouldn't leave me to feel I had blood on my hands for ever? Think of your daughter, my godchild, Marie—you would shrink from letting her be guilty of a man's murder. Won't you help me now—for my own sake?'

The man turned abruptly sharp round on his heel. Marie stood as he left her, motionless, in a passive wordless agony of suspense. Into the blankness of heart and mind strung to a tension which forbade consecutive thought, there suddenly sprang the words of her morning's psalm: 'Be strong, and He shall comfort thy heart.' Up to the God she believed in as a child believes, purely, faithfully, simply, she threw her voice-less prayer. 'Be strong, be strong. . . . And put thou thy trust in the Lord!'

Drury was still standing beside her, but as if not daring to speak or approach. He was looking at her as a slave might look at the arbiter of his life. The man was an idealist by nature: Dr. Scape and Jacques hitherto his idols. But from that moment Marie was enthroned as a queen higher than either.

Thwaites came back.

'We'll do as you say. They'll take him at

once. Will ye come for ard? Time's agwaine. We must lope-off.'

He had barely spoken the words before there was a violent movement close behind them. A door leading into the house, hitherto unnoticed by Marie, burst open inwards, and another man rushed in.

'Ho! Mates! Dey're here, raound thaouse! We must be off!' There was a rush for the trapdoor into the passage.

'Take him, oh, take him!' cried Marie.

'Must save our skins! Dere aint no-one left t'keep dat door into t'haouse. Dey'll be a-through it dracly-minute!'

Marie sprang to the trapdoor and barred the way.

'Take him, take him as you promised, and I'll go outside—into the house I mean—and keep the inner door.'

They hesitated a moment. Rough as they were, not one would willingly have hurt her—but time was precious.

'Thwaites! Tell them—tell them I can stop the Commandant if I see him—keep him back it will help you all.'

Looking round on the crowd of white strained faces, the faces indeed less of men than of wild beasts of the forest, she felt suddenly a thrill of power. Thwaites caught her by the coat.

'Come then, and I'll see 'tis done. We can get clear t'other side, mates, if they're kept here. Miss Maclean's in to-night, and will help us all. Now——'

In a whirl of rushing feet, torches waving and flickering as they were hastily seized and carried off, Marie was conscious of but two things. One was of the mattress with that tossing figure stretched upon it being rapidly borne away by four men through the trapdoor; the other Thwaites' parting words as he put her through that leading into the house.

'They won't hurt ye, surelye. Keep them nobbut a spell o' ten minutes, and we'll all be off. I'll be t'läaste t'leave, an bythen you hear t'trapdoor fall to, ye'll know all's safe. It shuts with a spring; no one can ever find that—God bless ye, for t'doctor's sake and all! We'll save his naäme and all of us now.'

Marie, in one of those quick turns of humour felt so ridiculously at the supremest crises, found herself, instead of considering her own danger, recalling with a smile an incident that had characterised one of the doctor's dinners at which Jacques and she had both been present. His old Gaelic housekeeper and cook, of whom the good man stood in great awe, had turned sulky, and not a single course or dish had come up fit to eat. The soup was smoked, the fish raw, the mutton sodden and burnt—the doctor had risen suddenly from his chair in a whirlwind of wrath.

- 'Elspeth, woman, is there nothing more to come?'
- 'Nothing,' the old crone had retorted in sullen satisfaction, 'but to return thanks.'

Thwaites' parting blessing seemed to be on much the same principle as Elspeth's, Marie thought, recalling the doctor's expression of countenance as he had dashed forward and hustled the old woman out of the room.

In another moment she found herself on the other side of the oaken nail-studded door, heard the key grate in the lock, and then perceived for the first time that Drury was still beside her.

CHAPTER VII

'Or course I shouldn't leave you,' said Drury.

Marie looked at him silently as if weighing his words, then held out her hand.

'Thank you,' she said. Action and words were simple, but underlying both was the recognition of something which at that moment put all class distinctions out of sight. He was but another man's servant, not even one of her own household bound by ties of clanship. Drury himself indeed bent over and saluted her outstretched hand 'with the reverential deference of the devoted retainer to his queen and mistress, but in Marie's heart was rather a feeling of the most intense, most pure gratitude, gratitude as to one who had arisen unexpectedly and unasked to enable her, though it might be unconsciously, to play her part to the end, and it meant the forging of a link more akin to comradeship. An instant conviction had seized her in the moment when her eyes fell upon him, that had she really been left alone, solitary, without one touch of human companionship to face the next scene in that rapidly moving drama, courage and self-control must have failed her. It could not be wholly as a servant that she accepted his presence.

She stood leaning against the tightly closed door, listening to the sound of trampling feet on its other side. In front of her ran a long, wide, stone-flagged passage, lighted only at intervals by skylights, and with doors opening to right and left on either side of it. Voices and footsteps coming from this part of the house were now easily distinguishable, and every instant brought them closer and made them more clear.

'Sit down, Drury,' said Marie. 'No need to stand. We can't even be on the defensive.'

Drury shook his head. He was trembling from head to foot as if seized with a fit of ague. In the fray in the early part of the night he had been shot through the shoulder, and the pain, suppressed to forgetfulness, was now avenging itself upon his nervous system. Marie knew nothing of this, but saw his face growing more and more ghastly as the morning light fell full upon it. It was nearly five o'clock, and he stood almost beneath one of the skylights.

'It will be easier for me if you sit, Drury. It will seem more natural,' she said persuasively, and the man, in deference to what he perceived was but good sense, dropped gratefully upon the floor.

'We must offer no resistance, you see. You have arms, Drury, but remember on no account are you to use or show them!'

Drury at this gave a ghastly grin.

'I never learnt to shoot with my left hand, Miss Marie, worse luck,' he said laconically.

The trampling came nearer. At the far end of the passage appeared a hustling crowd of figures—a confused medley of bright uniforms, faces, flashing steel and accoutrements, all worked in like a nightmare of shadowy dreams with the rush of heavy boots, and stamping feet, the clash of arms, and the hoarse inarticulate murmur of suppressed passions in rapidly crescending excite-Marie impulsively put both her hands behind her and pressed them hard against the door. The sight of the foremost advancing figure had all at once brought home in a vivid flash of dramatic consciousness the extraordinary anomalousness of her position. Up to that moment so quick, so breathless had been the action, so impelling the necessity, so irresistible the claims forced upon her, that what it meant as a personal thing had never presented itself to her consideration.

Now the terrible realisation flung itself with

unanswerable force before her mental vision. She clenched her hands against the rough jagged nails that studded the door, glad in that pain to still the other, the intolerable sharp agonising throb which seemed to pierce her through and through like a sword.

She turned wide-opened eyes full of wretched inquiry upon Drury.

'Oh, Drury, tell me! Why are we here?'

'I suppose because we are both trying to save some one else, Miss Marie,' he replied stoically.

His thoughts as he spoke went leaping to his beloved master, to the men—his comrades after all—whom he had tried to save from added crime, to the wounded man he had coaxed back to life with devotion; and Marie's to what her love for her brother had taught her should be her duty towards all humanity. Her moment of weakness went into the past, almost as thought wings through and then leaves the mind.

It was with a calm bearing, though her eyes were unnaturally large and bright, her teeth set, her hands gripping the door behind her as if they were made of steel, that she met Devignes' astonished, nay, panic-stricken gaze of recognition.

'Miss Maclean!'

He had been dashing along, naked sword in

one hand, pistol at full cock in the other, as though all England and France were being scoured of traitors before him. Now he came to an abrupt standstill, as if discrediting the evidence of his own senses.

- 'I may well ask is it—can it be—surely not!' He regained self-possession and voice, and advanced a step or two nearer.
- 'My God in heaven, it is!' Marie heard him mutter in sheer blank incredulity under his breath.
 - 'Yes, it's I!' said Marie, helplessly.
 - 'And—and who is this?'

He looked at Drury.

- 'Drury. He came with me.'
- 'Did you want Dr. Scape?'

He stared first at one and then at the other, extreme discomposure struggling with indescribable amazement.

- 'I—I don't think so,' said Marie.
- 'Then what are you doing here?' His voice rang sharp and clear, rough from the very necessity for self-control.

No answer. Marie remained as if turned to stone, and Drury, huddled up at her feet, was silent also.

Devignes stooped forward and turned the latter's face to the light.

'Fainted,' he said briefly. 'Take him, two of you.'

A curious silence had fallen all at once—hushed was every sound except the hard breathing of the panting soldiers as they stood crowding behind. At Devignes' order two of them detached themselves quietly, as if so subdued by this strange dénouement that they hardly realised their own identity. The quiet deadness of the atmosphere was horrible to Marie—worse than any noise. She gave one loud sob. It sounded strangely unnatural, rasping the silence, and one by one the men fell back as if only anxious to get away.

'You will permit me to offer you an escort home, Miss Maclean,' said Devignes, with a courtesy in his bow and low clear tones that to her was like the cutting of a sharp knife: it made her indeed recall that horrid moment the day before when she had drawn one across her foot—the very remembrance of that sensation of physical recoil thrilled her through. So vivid was it that she found herself cautiously feeling the wounded foot with the other, to wonder why it no longer pained her—and she lost Devignes' next words.

... 'No doubt you expected to find the doctor. I am sorry your journey should have

been in vain. I can only hope his services were not wanted for anything very serious.'

His tones penetrated to the ears of every listening soldier. He was trying to shield her then before them; how kind, thought Marie, and then smiled because it was after all so unnecessary. Soldiers, smugglers, villagers, gentle-people—in all that concerned the smuggling trade everybody in Lodeswell knew everything about everybody else, however much or however little they were personally implicated, or for whichever side it was that they fought.

Devignes was speaking again.

- 'I am waiting, Miss Maclean.' He was tapping on the ground with his spurred heel.
- 'Oh, yes!' returned Marie, catching her breath, but not attempting to stir.
 - 'Are you not going to move, may I ask?'
 - 'Oh, no!' still more faintly.
 - 'I'm afraid you must, and at once.'

Marie made no reply. The deep lines between Devignes' eyebrows became graven furrows. He wheeled sharply to the men behind him.

'Search those rooms. Make haste.'

The soldiers marched away, dispersing to left and to right. When their backs were turned he advanced to Marie, and spoke in low quick tones. The stern formal ring of authority in them was unlike anything she had ever heard from any man before.

'Miss Maclean, I ask you in the King's name to stand aside. As his officer I must, and at once, have access to that room.'

He was doing his best for her, his best to save both her and the situation. She knew that. Marie raised her eyes, and even at that moment he could not but notice in a flash how beautiful, how infinitely beautiful, they were. Out of the pallor of her wan tired face they shone, black-rimmed and bright, like stars in the sky of a summer night when it begins to pale towards morning. And the look they bore—full of the uncomprehending, helpless endurance of a child, not understanding why it suffers, but patient in silence because there seems no alternative—cut him to the heart, roused him to a great anger against the people who had placed her in such a position.

'I can't, I can't let you through!' said Marie in an incoherent whisper. It had become so terrible to her to face this man, that every thought and feeling was petrified from sheer fright. She could only cling vaguely to something that she knew she had promised. She must keep her place till she heard the sound of that trapdoor.

Half turning from Devignes, and hardly know-

ing what she did, obeying the mere impulse of the moment, she wound her hands in and out of the chain which fastened the staple on that side. Devignes came nearer; he was gentle but perfectly firm as he took her hands and loosed the fingers one after the other. So gentle was he, so unwilling to hurt her either physically or mentally, that though she could not in the first instance offer resistance, she was able simply to reclasp each finger as fast as he detached it. In dead silence the process was repeated, once, twice, three times.

'I can't hurt you,' muttered Devignes. 'I can't—you know it. Is this fair, Miss Maclean?' he burst out passionately. 'Is this fair? If I could tell you what this delay means!'

He stamped his foot with impatience, and bit his lip till the blood came. Then he let her go, and stood back one moment and surveyed her. Marie made no comment, but twisted her hands tighter than ever.

- 'You won't give way?'
- 'Oh, no.'
- 'I do this in the King's name, remember,' he said abruptly, and catching her unawares by the shoulders he literally forced her away. Marie said nothing, her fingers were closely entwined. Devignes undid them forcibly this time, thrust her to one side, and threw himself heavily against

the door. It cracked and swayed. He held Marie off, his right arm barring the way, while with the other hand he snatched his pistol from where he had replaced it in his belt, and cocking it with a dexterous jerk of two fingers fired it straight against the lock. At that ill-fated moment another pistol went off; it was Marie's, hidden in her coat pocket. She screamed, but it was Devignes' arm that dropped. The noise brought the soldiers hurrying back to find Marie leaning against the wall, Devignes in front of her and the door free. With a shout they flung themselves man after man against it, hacking with swords, driving with the butt end of muskets, kicking with heavy spurred boots crash after crash upon the nail-studded panels.

Marie faced round desperately upon Devignes.

'Oh, you make me break my promise!' she cried. But just then she heard the noise of the trapdoor within shutting to with a peculiar rasping sound that she could not mistake. The soldiers at the same moment burst in from their side—but it was to an empty room. Marie sat down just where she was beside the battered door, covered her face up in her coat and cried.

^{&#}x27;You will let me see you home now, I hope, Miss Maclean?'

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She looked up then, and saw Devignes standing close beside her. But his eyes were studiously averted, and his face was set in hard inscrutable lines. His tones were so lifeless in their monotonous dead level, so devoid of all feeling, that somehow Marie took fresh alarm, at what she did not know. He was busy wrapping a hand-kerchief round one wrist.

'Your friends have escaped us—so your task is fulfilled. You will come home now?'

It was easier to resist his words of command. This way of speaking sounded so unfamiliar that Marie, even as she rose mechanically to obey, looked at him furtively with ill-defined apprehen-It was worse than anything she could have dreamt of. He offered her his arm, and led the way out through the house. At the front door a closed carriage was waiting; he handed her in. guarding her dress solicitously from the wheel, and folding a big rug, heaped in one corner, carefully round her. He asked her if she preferred one side of the carriage to the other, if she would like the windows up or down, if he might offer her a stool for her feet or a cushion for her head. But it was all in the same mechanical tone, and after receiving her replies, and apologising for the further intrusion of his presence upon her, he leant back in his corner in perfect silence. Marie began to have a subtle feeling of something like remorse in her heart, personal remorse, for him, though why she did not know. She looked at his profile as he sat with his head turned from her, staring straight out of the window on his side of the carriage, and wished it did not look so grave, so sad, so wretchedly depressed.

The jolt of the carriage over the hard ruts shook her, and presently one terrible lurch threw her bodily against him. That made him look round—and Marie spoke on the impulse of the moment.

'Oh, did I do very wrong? Are you very angry?'

'Angry? Angry?' He looked upon her, but Marie could not fathom the depth of bitterness in his eyes, because she was not yet capable of understanding what had caused it.

He paused, as if weighing what he should reply.

- 'The matter is no personal one, Miss Maclean.'
 - 'You look so—disappointed!' faltered Marie.
- 'My business is my King's and country's—is it not well I should be—disappointed, did you say?—when I find traitors and treacherous abetting of traitors where I had looked to find loyalty and faith? If I could but make you realise the

shameful part you are playing!' It burst from him in a flash of righteous anger.

Marie shrank as from a blow.

- 'I don't understand!' was all her quivering lips could frame.
- 'No, it seems not. More shame to those who have used you as a tool. No '—he put up a hand —'no, you need explain nothing to me, confess nothing, own nothing. Keep faith to some one!'
 - 'But you?'
- 'I?' laughed Devignes. 'I?' It was a horrid laugh, and made Marie wince again, for the man was sore to his very soul, since honour to his King and fidelity to his duty were the breath of life to him, and he could neither understand nor pardon their lack in others. And there was something else, which she did, in a measure, dimly realise—the bitterness of a momentary disillusion respecting herself. The cynicism of the man of the world had been yielding to a purer, better appreciation of humanity under the influence of what he saw in her might be a possible realisation of a long-buried ideal—the embodiment of truthfulness and simplicity in woman. He had believed in her innocence and the unwillingness of her complicity till that morning; her actions now had come with a shock which for

the moment obscured his judgment. It was a shock like a physical hurt.

'I?—I have enough to think about to last me, my dear lady, so long as the world has any meaning left for a soldier.'

And Marie knew by the very lightness with which he addressed her how low she had fallen in his esteem.

They stopped at the Manor House gate.

'The sun is up,' he said; 'you will perhaps prefer going in quietly, without unduly advertising your expedition.'

He helped her out, opened the heavy side door for her, saluted, and left her.

CHAPTER VIII

MARIE crept like a humbled ghost through bypaths and shrubs till close to the house. The hall-door stood open, for directly the household began to be astir on these fine summer mornings every door and window was flung wide, and it was now well past six o'clock.

She stood wretchedly hesitating to leave her shelter for a moment or two, but all was still and peaceful; no one seemed to be about, and, as she reasoned with herself, after all, even if she did meet some wandering servant, it was no unusual thing for her to be out so early. She often rose at five or six to pick the flowers for house and table before breakfast, loving the first fresh sweet hours of the day best of all, when the world, the beautiful world of God's creation, seemed to belong all to herself, and her thoughts, pure and sweet as the dew she brushed from the flowers she moved amongst, might wander to the dreamland of her life undisturbed by the prosaic claims of every day.

She was, perhaps, in reality too dispirited and

too weary to care much just then whether any one saw her or not. But when, safe within the shelter of her own room, she suddenly caught a glimpse of herself in the glass, she realised, with an inexpressible feeling of relief, how lucky it was that fate had so far favoured her! No one could have connected the poetry of early dew and innocent flower-picking with the miserable degraded-looking object that confronted her! Marie gave one frightened look, and tearing off her clothes helter-skelter, plunged straightway into the friendly cover of bed, as if there she might perhaps bury for ever her disgrace and humiliation.

Meanwhile Jacques and Lady Hepzibah were dawdling over a late tête-à-tête breakfast. Jacques, fresh as healthy nineteen can very well be even after a night's hard riding, his business so far safely concluded that he could afford for the time being to put anxiety aside, knowing as yet nothing of Dr. Scape's arrest, nothing of his sister's escapades, was in the most buoyant spirits.

He had gone straight to his room on returning early that morning, not wishing to disturb Marie again, and only intent on getting some sleep, and had risen for breakfast in sufficiently good time to prevent his aunt from asking any awkward questions. He had trusted to Marie to replace the bonnet, and the tell-tale lace was safe

with Dangars; what had he now particularly to fear?

But with Marie it was otherwise. She had no need to find excuses for absence from breakfast, as Lady Hepzibah's last injunction had been to forbid her rising, and had she been able to sleep there was nothing to prevent her. But her slumber lasted till the first spell of utter exhaustion had passed, then perturbation of spirit and mind got the mastery again, and all the events of the past terrible twenty-four hours rose in remorseless array, like a crowd of evil spirits waiting in silent watchfulness for the moment of weakness when they might rush in and seize their victim unawares. It was useless staying in bed-her restlessness of mind communicated itself to her body, tired, aching, and bruised as she was. She could not wait a moment before seeking relief from the only possible sourceher co-conspirator. She must see Jacques at Shaking and trembling, she dragged once. herself from bed with the first moment of full consciousness, huddling on her clothes with eyes averted, and cheeks alternately paling and reddening-she could scarcely bear the sight of the familiar objects about her, the big coat like a ghost bereft of all but hateful memories, the pistol flung carelessly down, Jacques' driving

gloves, and the snippets of lace and cotton peeping out of her work-basket.

The sun was streaming in full and bright, haloing everything it touched with caressing light, but Marie's first impulse was to fly to the window and draw the curtain-how could she bear to look on that eastern sky now, with the thought of those happy dreams, and the promises made by the dawn, in such bitter contrast with what their practical interpretation had meant? 'Oh, how can I ever forget?' cried Marie abruptly, stopping short in the middle of the room to press her hands over her eyes. She fled hastily from the room, eager only to escape from the persecuting associations, yet for sheer weakness obliged to cling to doors and wall to guide and support her. Along the corridors and down the first flight of stairs she crept, holding to the banisters for support—it all seemed so long and steep, her knees so strangely weak beneath her! She was obliged to pause on the first landing to try and recover her self-possession and even her breath a little, just sufficient to nerve herself for the meeting with Lady Hepzibah, unsuspicious and trusting as those kind eyes were. There was a big dormer window just here, with a low deep window-seat. Marie sank gratefully down, raised her eyes to glance out over the peaceful sunny gardens—and then started up with a cry of dismay. A party of horsemen were galloping up to the front door—already they were dismounting—she could distinguish the leaders.

mistaking the portly form of the Commandant, and oh! how her heart turned faint within her! no mistaking the lithe figure swinging himself out of the saddle at that very moment! Even in her terror Marie had an odd momentary flash of pleasure in seeing how differently he did it from any of the other men. The rest were ordinary troopers in the uniform of the company then occupying the fort at Langley Point, and under charge for the time being of the Commandant as supplementing the Excise Service. One glance was enough; gone were fatigue, lassitude, even anxiety, like little rain-clouds flying before a squall. All was then lost—the awful moment had come, detection. exposure—disgrace. Marie literally flung herself down the stairs.

The voices of brother and aunt, raised in gay badinage, reached her from the state dining-room. It was used for all meals in summer, even when only two of them were at home, because of its delicious coolness. The chief door, opening into the hall, faced the front entrance, but there were

several others leading from the adjoining suites of rooms. Marie darted into one of these, and was just entering at the further side when with a great clatter the main door from the hall opened and the Commandant and Devignes were ushered in.

The noise of spurs and swords and measured marching outside had already made Jacques and his aunt rise hastily from their seats, and at the sight of the two officers Lady Hepzibah advanced quickly to meet them, her manner gracious, though surprise struggled hard with welcome. There was that in their bearing and manner which signified something unusual.

'And to what do I owe the pleasure of this early call?' she asked. 'In uniform, too, Commandant! And did I hear the clattering of spurs outside? What has happened? You alarm me! But perhaps you are just riding past with your men? I hope nothing is wrong.'

The Commandant was unable either to advance or to meet her eyes. He stood his ground, indeed, though as near the door as he could without being actually on the other side Fumbling nervously with his sword-hilt, he looked for all reply to Devignes.

Devignes was already halfway up the room.

There he stopped, not offering to salute Lady Hepzibah except by a profound bow.

'Our business is that of His Majesty, madam,' he said, with grave formality. 'You will, under the circumstances, I am sure, pardon the intrusion of our armed troopers into your presence.'

Lady Hepzibah returned the bow with a ceremonious courtesy which implied, for all its deference, that she was yet awaiting a proper explanation.

At his first words a subtle change seemed to sweep over her. Jacques and Marie could only look on in amazement. Gone was the kindly, simple, unconventional lady they knew as aunt, gone even the dignified Lady of the Manor, and here suddenly arisen before them was that creation—une Grande Dame! In that moment they first became aware of the gulf set between the current of her life as they had always seen it, and that which it had been before.

'You will explain your errand, messieurs, without delay or hesitation. I am a loyal subject—God bless His Majesty!'

'Amen,' said Devignes—the bow he made to Lady Hepzibah showed that he at least appreciated the significance of her newly assumed demeanour—and the Commandant, behind him, echoed the prayer in a thick voice.

'You will pardon my abruptness when I state that my errand is to search this house, having reason to believe that certain persons evilly disposed towards the King's Government are concealed herein.'

Lady Hepzibah proved in that moment how real was her claim to high breeding by not moving a muscle. No earthquake, no thunder-clap, no falling of her very house about her ears could have produced a more astounding shock. But her face was as imperturbable, her tones were as formal, as Devignes' own.

'Your warrant, sir, if you please.'

For answer he drew some papers from his breast pocket, and with a respectful inclination handed them to her. In silence, without a tremor of her fingers as she turned the sheets, Lady Hepzibah read them through, line by line—slowly, deliberately, and with ostentatious care.

Jacques stood motionless beside her, looking straight in front of him with a blank, meaningless stare, while Marie's face, twitching beyond control, was hidden in her hands.

'You must pardon our having addressed you hitherto with so great a disregard of your rightful position—my lord!' said Lady Hepzibah at last, handing back the papers with a regal gesture. 'You will of course do your duty.'

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Devignes turned to the Commandant.

'Direct your men where to go,' he said briefly.

The Commandant, tumbling helplessly over his sword, which in his agitation he had forgotten to hitch up, and dropping his hat in his anxiety to escape, laid hasty hands on the door-handle.

'You will permit us to remain here,' said Lady Hepzibah coldly, reseating herself with deliberation. 'Nephew, niece, you had better sit down. These gentlemen may take some time.'

'It is a mere matter of form,' said Devignes.

'As I am but carrying out my instructions, I can add nothing but personal apologies and regrets.'

'Under the circumstances they are unnecessary,' replied Lady Hepzibah.

A long pause ensued. When the Commandant had left the room Devignes walked across to the window, stationing himself at right angles to the other occupants of the room, with his back just sufficiently turned to prevent his meeting their eyes.

Lady Hepzibah folded her hands in her lap, and maintained absolute silence. But her head was held very high, and a fixed red spot glowed on either sallow cheek. Jacques remained standing, his right hand resting on the back of his aunt's chair, upright, steady, self-possessed. The

crisis had brought a change in him also: he bore himself as a boy no longer, but as a man, conscious of his responsibilities and his position as head of his family.

As to Marie, she was constrained by the shaking of her limbs simply to sit down just where she was. Glancing up once towards Devignes, she found his eyes fixed steadily upon her. The colour, faint and pure, tinged her cheek for a moment, but faded the next. Worlds apart were they now, so the aching conviction came home to her, and she in the nethermost. She was despised utterly; she felt it. But her helplessness before the unspoken condemnation, if it accentuated the sting, brought at least its own courage. Since he thought her all base, all unworthy, why care at all? It was Jacques and his interests, with whom, for good or ill, she had It should be so now and identified herself. altogether. Lady Hepzibah's bearing had its influence also; insensibly Marie too tried to draw herself up, prepared to comport herself with at least a measure of the dignity of which she had so brilliant an example before her.

'Only she has nothing to reproach herself with—it is so easy for her,' thought poor Marie. 'Did he really think her altogether wicked, really and truly a liar?' She could not have helped

that one little glance again at him! He was looking at her still, but was it in contempt? Marie dropped her eyes again, and wished she were a better girl.

The trampling of returning feet presently broke the silence, and the door opened to admit the Commandant. He marched a few steps into the room, a detachment of four soldiers behind him carrying between them a prodigious box, which, in obedience to a gesture from their commander, they placed upon the table, retiring again in measured order to the far end of the room. All eyes were immediately fixed upon their burden.

'May I ask if that is all that you have found?' inquired Lady Hepzibah with a calmness that augured ill. 'It is my bonnet box, I think. Surely, gentlemen, you cannot be playing some farcical jest upon us!'

Devignes turned sharp round to the Commandant.

- 'Have you searched the house throughout?'
- 'I have, sir.'
- 'And found nothing—nobody?'
- 'Nobody; nothing but this.'

Devignes looked then towards Lady Hepzibah.

'Will you permit me, madam, to explain, so far as my orders will allow me?'

- 'With pleasure,' said Lady Hepzibah.
- 'My business in this part of the world is shown by those papers you hold.' Lady Hepzibah inclined her head majestically.

'There was and still is reason to believe that under cover of and in conjunction with the smuggling trade extensively practised along the coast—you are no doubt aware of the fact—certain treasonable correspondences with the national enemy have been carried on. It was represented to us, on sufficiently good authority, that an expedition which took place and ended in an affray between Friday night and Saturday morning of last week was deliberately undertaken with a view to further this. It has therefore become essential that every clue connected in any way with that affair should be strictly investigated.'

Devignes paused. He was carefully weighing every word.

'Quite right, sir,' replied Lady Hepzibah' stiffly. 'Quite right. But I still fail to grasp your point as to the necessity of examining my house, or my apparel.'

She glanced at the bonnet-box, a considerable blot on the polished surface of the long mahogany table.

'The Manor House, madam, is roomy, and a

large part of it is disused. The very fact of its being above suspicion, and as such the most likely place of refuge that would suggest itself to an ingenious mind, is the reason why I am forced to regard it with suspicion. You follow me, madam?'

Lady Hepzibah looked slightly mollified.

- 'You mean that my name and honour might be deliberately used as a cover, where those of persons less well known for their loyalty would be considered insufficient?'
 - 'Precisely.'
- 'You have doubtless then only done your duty. It is now discharged, and I trust you will consider satisfactorily.'
- 'Hardly, madam. There is still one point. You are naturally concerned as to why so personal a thing as the trimming on any lady's head-covering can be implicated in so great and important an issue. Without your permission I should not wish to examine it, especially as we have your own word,' he bowed profoundly here, 'that it is wholly and entirely your own property. But, madam, the same reasons with regard to the peculiar advantages of your house as a cover apply in this case. We have had positive evidence that the lace used in trimming the bonnet you were pleased to wear yesterday in public is

lace which can be identified as brought over in the course of this illegal trade. I scarcely need say we believe you to have been deceived, and grossly deceived, in the matter.'

'Yesterday,' said Lady Hepzibah, and the Commandant shook as he had never done under fire at the note of rising anger which vibrated significantly, to those who knew her well, in the apparently calm measured tones, 'I wore lace on my bonnet which was so essentially my own property that, as I told you, it was made by myself. You imply doubt of my word.'

'I imply nothing, madam. I have stated my position.'

Lady Hepzibah rose from her seat, her face literally scarlet, but holding herself upright as a dart. It was evident she was making the most supreme efforts at retaining self-control.

'Preposterous,' she muttered, 'preposterous, preposterous.'

The sound of her sharply indrawn breath was all that broke the silence.

'You are accusing me—accusing me—accusing me—of treasonable practices! Of deliberate lying—of barefacedly flaunting my disgrace, dishonour, treachery; 'tis monstrous, incredible!' For one moment it seemed as if she would break

down. Her hand went to her throat, and she struggled hard for composure.

Jacques stepped suddenly forward, but an imperious gesture stopped him. Lady Hepzibah had recovered herself.

'Nephew, silence. I command it. My name and honour need no defence. I refuse, and I forbid you, to answer one single question further, to make one single inquiry. Search my house, gentlemen, from cellar to attic, look where you please, inspect my property, my papers. Here are my private keys,' she pulled them from her pocket, and placed them with a superb gesture on the table. 'Open and read wherever you feel disposed. I not only give you permission, I demand it as a right, and at once.'

Devignes confronted her with concentrated gravity. Every feeling was absorbed in admiration of her behaviour, but he still hardly believed her to be telling the whole truth.

'I shall remain here in this room with my nephew and niece, in the presence of your soldiers, while you yourself conduct the search. There is nothing more to be said.'

She reseated herself.

Devignes advanced slowly, and took up the keys.

'If I conduct this further search, madam, it

is at your request, not mine. I shall do it as part of the fealty that I owe to His Majesty. You will, I trust, acquit me of all personal feeling in the matter.'

'I need no assurance from you upon that point,' retorted Lady Hepzibah haughtily. 'Your name, Lord Carisbrooke, is sufficient guarantee for your conduct as a gentleman. We met as strangers, the merest acquaintances, for the first time yesterday. There can be no personal feeling between us for good or ill. If I were capable of any further sensitiveness on the point it would be that those who have been intimate with my character, name, and conduct for wellnigh a lifetime, could have found no means of reassuring you as to this from experience. It is not the hand of a mere stranger that can deal us the blows that inflict pain.'

She levelled one glance at the Commandant, a glance so withering in its contempt that even Devignes felt sorry for him.

'My colleague is my subordinate, madam. He obeys my orders, not his own feelings. Had I listened to the assurances he gave me on his honour with regard to this very point, we should not be here. I am, however, bound, in the position that I hold in the matter, to trust to nothing but my own experience.'

'I have nothing further to say,' said Lady Hepzibah coldly.

The Commandant made one inarticulate protesting murmur. True soldier by training and nature as he was, self-defence before his superior officer was wellnigh impossible to him. Often as he had faced death, this was perhaps the most terrible moment of his life.

- 'Madam,' he began, helplessly.
- 'Commandant,' replied Lady Hepzibah, resting her eyes upon him for one instant as upon one who was so far away that it was out of human power to recognise him—'it is so impossible for me to believe that your partaking of my hospitality during the past three days, while in company with this gentleman and cognisant of his designs, can have been in the character of a spy, that I beg you will say nothing. The length of our friendship forbids it. Pray leave us.'

With a clatter of his sword, a face set like iron, and eyes fixed immovably in front of him, the Commandant wheeled to leave the room. But Jacques recalled him.

'Commandant! Mr. Devignes—pardon, my Lord Carisbrooke I should say—wait one moment. I shall add nothing to what my aunt has said beyond defending her word and honour in the only way possible. As head of this house and

family, the last male representative and protector of her and her interests, I put myself at your disposal. Regard me, if you please, as responsible in every particular for my aunt Lady Hepzibah, and for my sister Miss Maclean. I am prepared to place myself under arrest.'

Devignes looked him up and down.

'It would be advisable,' he said dryly.

The Commandant opened the door, and beckoned to the troopers outside, who came filing in.

'You will take Mr. Maclean into custody,' said Devignes. 'Convey him to the Fort, and at once.'

Two of the men detached themselves and came forward.

'I have your permission?' said Jacques lightly, with a glance at Devignes. He dropped on one knee beside Lady Hepzibah, raised her hand to his lips with a graceful gesture of farewell, and turned to Marie. Devignes made one impulsive step forward as if he would have checked him, then stopped abruptly, leaning on his sword, with a deep frown between his eyebrows. Explanation between these two was the very thing he wished to prevent, but still it could scarcely be obviated now. And after all it could be but for a moment.

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'Au revoir, Marie,' said Jacques aloud. He leaned forward to kiss her cheek as she sat, unable to move or speak, and whispered, 'Remember, silence. I leave those lives in trust with you.'

He marched down to meet the troopers half-way, and in doing so had to pass Devignes closely. Devignes straightened himself at that moment, and looked Jacques squarely in the face.

'You'll thank me for permitting this presently,' he said in an undertone. No one else heard the words, and Jacques laughed pleasantly, for he liked the man; there was the making, the possibility, of real and genuine friendship between them, and each felt it. As he passed on his eyes fell on the bonnet-box.

'There's one other arrest, Commandant, you ought to make,' he sang out gaily, and pointed derisively at the plumes just nodding over the edges.

Devignes smothered a smile, and looked at the Commandant.

- 'Have you examined the lace?'
- 'No!" thundered out the Commandant, his pent-up feelings finding sudden vent.
- 'You had, perhaps, better take it, then,' said Devignes.

The Commandant, in his stiffest and most

military manner, advanced like another martyr to the stake.

'Arrest that—Object!' he roared, in a voice that woke the echoes from rafter to rafter.

Two more troopers marched stolidly forward, and took up the box between them. Sussex they were to the backbone, and not a feature relaxed, not a smile was to be seen.

The Commandant's face was black as night. Lady Hepzibah, glancing neither to right nor left, sat immovably erect and perfectly impassive; Marie looked as if life had left her.

Only the graceless Jacques, throwing back his red head, burst out into a wild fit of delighted, gay, irrepressible laughter.

Devignes, making his way out last of all, hastily drew his hand across his mouth. He was readjusting his opinions again.

CHAPTER IX

LATE that evening Drury called.

Marie had spent the rest of the day entirely alone. On the departure of the Commandant with Jacques, Devignes took Lady Hepzibah at her word, and made his own complete search throughout the house. It was past twelve before he had finished, and meanwhile Lady Hepzibah with Marie by her side remained motionless and silent in the big dining-hall, just as Jacques had left them.

Devignes went through his task with impassive demeanour, returned the keys presently to Lady Hepzibah, made formal apologies, and took a formal leave. Then and then only, with the final clanging of the house-door and the last clatter of horse-hoofs down the drive, did she rise from her seat.

'Child, I am best left alone,' was all she said.

Her expression was so unusual in its grim, pained stoicism, that Marie dared not offer even the consolation of a caress. And whatever she might have done if left to herself, confession or explanation, with Jacques' parting words ringing in her ears, was not to be thought of. She could only stand aside, in shame and grief, and watch her aunt trailing wearily up the wide shallow staircase as if even that slight exertion was agony, though her head was held erect to the last. heard the key turn in the lock as Lady Hepzibah disappeared within her room, and the grating sound seemed of itself to shut her off into utter darkness. Alone and solitary was she once more. with all the sickening weight of responsibility heavier than ever upon her! What was she to do now? She could not bear the confinement of the house: the walls seemed to be closing in upon her like wire cages, and she fled to the far end of the garden, where at least Nature would be a safe confidante, and, free from observation, she might be alone to fight or reason out her battle. Up and down, up and down, between the box-edged paths, over the lawns, in and out under the trees, round and round the fountains, aimless yet ever hastening to some fresh place, she wandered mechanically throughout the rest of that dreadful day, over and over in her mind revolving the same weary question, with the same miserable, hopeless indecision as result.

What, after all, would be the right thing to do?

If she could only settle that, surely, whatever the sacrifice, there could be no further mistakes, no further misconceptions? At any rate no need for any more false positions, false words, or playing at cross-purposes. She could do the right, whatever it cost, thought Marie, if only she could decide what that was. It was shameful, she saw it now clearly enough, this compromising of her aunt's honour and good name, by using her, her house, her bonnet, to hoodwink and baffle. to save others, could that be loval from members of the same family one to another? And yet, supposing that now, at the eleventh hour, she told Lady Hepzibah? Ought she, without asking Jacques, to betray his trust, and the trust of the men whose safety was dependent on his secrecy? That could never, surely, be right either. Could there then arise questions wherein perfect honesty might only involve dishonesty, a betrayal of trust in another direction; wherein right and wrong could not stand out as clear issues? however one might deliberately choose to follow the wrong, no mistake could be made as to the fact that it was wrong? Surely if only one were perfectly sincere in desiring to pursue the right. one must be able at least to see it?

But her questionings always ended in the same way.

'I don't know-I don't know. We were wrong from the first, somehow,' she murmured. pacing up and down and up and down, oblivious of the summer beauty, hearing neither the song of the birds nor the murmur of the sea, nor the music stirring in the poplars. She scarcely knew if the sun were shining or not; the sweet scent of the roses passed her by-the balmy July air might have been bitterest east wind for all her notice. She would not yet own even to herself that the beginning of all things was a flaw in her idol, that if Jacques had kept his hands clean from all dabbling with things, which, however they might be condoned, had at any rate to be done in the dark, none of all this shame need ever have crossed their path. For when the realisation began to dawn, with it came the poignant con sciousness:

'Had I been strong enough to tell Jacques it was dishonourable, had I only been better and more honourable myself, he might have listened to me and I might have prevented some of it. I think I am most to blame through it all. Oh, why didn't I know better?' sobbed Marie at last, breaking down once more in sheer self-abasement. And then came other thoughts, so much there was to ponder over, to vex and disturb each issue. Now she permitted herself for the first time to

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confront soberly and deliberately those terrible ghosts, each event, look, act, and word of the previous night. What had Devignes meant? She smiled a wan little smile as his name leapt to her thoughts. Lord Carisbrooke he was then, not just a simple soldier like the Commandant, and he had come down on purpose to spy out somethingsomething surely worse than the smuggling of lace? No one had ever thought that so very wrong, as evidently he did. What had he meant? 'Treasonable correspondence,' he had said. And 'treacherous abetting of traitors!' What did it all mean? She had indeed been so faint that morning, the terror of exposure benumbing every faculty, her fears respecting the main issue strangely commingling with those personal ones which underlay the relations between herself and Devignes, that half of what had passed had simply escaped her notice, and her mind was still far too confused to be able clearly to piece the incoherent bits of puzzle together. She was worn out with fatigue and helpless worry, and only detached sentences floated like weed upon a chaotic sea of foam and surge before her eyes, while the recollection of what she had heard rang like a disconnected, jangling peal of bells in her ears: 'If I could but make you understand the shameful part you are playing!' Was it so dreadfully wicked then to smuggle? Marie had never felt quite easy in her mind about it, but Jacques had been her conscience up to now—Jacques and the kindhearted old doctor, and they had condoned it. Public opinion at least had never condemned the practice, so far as she had heard.

It was a relief, even though it meant that a decision must be made one way or another, when she caught sight of Drury coming towards her between the clipped box borders. At least with him there need be no concealment. He had seen her on entering the gates, and so, though even if he had met any one to question him about his business it would have mattered little, since he frequently carried messages up to the Manor House from the doctor whenever anything was wanted for some sick person in the village, he had no need to-night to explain his presence.

After all, there were but few servants now at the Manor, and these were old, slow, and decrepit; faithful relics of bygone days. Marie was almost glad to remember the stone-deafness of one, the failing sight of another, the rheumatism-crippled energies of a third, when Drury came limping forlornly over the grass towards her. His appearance must have provoked comment, so altered and strange was it. The alertness was gone, and with it self-confidence and youth. Only a certain

defiant doggedness remained. He looked like an old man, and an invalid at that. He halted and stumbled as he walked, one arm was in a sling, his shoulders were hunched up till his chin rested on his chest, and the look of dragging anxiety stamped on his face gave Marie a shock that quickly resolved itself into overwhelming compassion. It had not occurred to her how much the same expression was written large on her own features! But Drury saw it, and for a moment he stood looking at her without seeming able to articulate a syllable.

Marie spoke first. 'You won't probably have heard our news,' she said drearily; 'I must tell you that. But first, Drury, is all well with that poor man?'

Drury nodded. 'They took him to Thwaites', but in any case it isn't safe. No house in the village could be. They mean to search every one.'

'They have searched ours,' said Marie, with a pitiful little smile. 'And Mr. Jacques gave himself up to avoid further questions. I had no time to tell him even of last night.'

Drury's countenance became blank with dismay, and his jaw dropped.

'Tell me all, Miss Marie,' he said, and briefly Marie recounted the morning's adventures. There was no need to keep anything back, except, what was to her now a bygone episode, the original reason for the exchange of lace upon the bonnet; and she wanted advice badly. When Drury had heard it all, he stood pondering for some minutes.

'It works out better than one would have thought, Miss Marie,' he said presently, with a sigh. 'They've searched here, and won't again, not yet anyhow. It serves our plan better. If we can hide this man—his name's Le Clos—for just a few days here, we may save him. It will only be for a few days at best,' he added sadly, and he put his hand to his eyes for a moment. Worn out physically, the starting tears of emotion could not be suppressed. 'Either in a week's time we can ship him over to France—or—the moment he can move he shall—you sha'n't be in danger a second longer than I can help—but what else can I do?'

He paused. His tone insensibly became that of the servant after all, the servant awaiting his orders.

Marie threw out her hands with a gesture of desperation. 'We promised. That at least is clear. I gave my word. He must come, and to-night. It must be by the little south-west door; there's a room just to the right inside the

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porch room. It's full of lumber, no one ever goes in, but there's another room opening from it, and another from that, with a door on the old stone staircase leading to the attics. No one ever goes up it now. You could get in to him by the outer door—I'll give you the key, and I could always reach you through the house if necessary. Would that do? It's all I can think of.'

Drury nodded assent, his weary face brightening a little. 'There'll be a moon to-night, but we must risk it. I'll be here about two. It's as good a time as any. Dr. Scape will be very grateful to you,' he added earnestly. 'Twould be impertinent if I said so for myself, but I've grown fond of the boy, and Dr. Scape has known him a long time. He will bless you always.'

They had been slowly walking down the garden, and as Drury spoke Marie all at once, as though her limbs would support her no longer, sat down on the low stone balustrade that edged one side of the grass terrace which they had just reached. She motioned him to stand in front of her.

'Drury,' she said simply, 'I've been thinking all this out, and see one thing. It's a disgrace to be mixed up in any of these tradings at all—yes, don't stop me, a disgrace which sits most heavily on—on us, my brother and myself. I own this to you because I feel that I ought. If we had

behaved honourably in discountenancing smuggling from the very first, the village people might have been ashamed of it too in time. That's what I know now of what noblesse oblige means. It was for us to set the example. Well—we're to blame, and now there's this catastrophe. I don't see what else I can do now but help the wretched people our bad example has helped to do the wrong. So don't talk of gratitude, or anything else.'

Drury was silent, but into his eyes came again that look of dumb worship.

Marie sat still looking out desolately over the garden, and then went on.

- 'It's so difficult once one has done the wrong to know where one may stop. If I could I would tell my aunt all—but I daren't now, because it would mean making her an accomplice. I must either deceive her absolutely, or place her in the more difficult position of deciding how far we are right in shielding these men, how far disloyal.
- . . . We never, nobody ever thought it so very wrong to smuggle, Drury?'
 - 'No, Miss Marie.'
- 'Yet he—Mr. Devignes I mean—said it was abetting traitors—he said it was treasonable correspondence. . . . I never thought it could be that! The people are so poor, and the duties and prices

of everything so high, and every one keeps the kegs they leave, even Dr. Scape. And he's the best man in the place.'

- ' Treasonable correspondence!' repeated Drury.
- 'It seems odd to call it that somehow, doesn't it?' said Marie dubiously. 'Is it worse now we're at war with France than it was before?'

She was looking far away over seas, and did not eatch the sudden awakening to comprehension that sprang to Drury's face.

'Treasonable correspondence,' he was repeating under his breath. 'Treasonable correspondence.'

Marie must have noticed the effort he was making to control manner, expression, and voice, had she given but one, the most casual glance at him.

'Don't look at it in that way, Miss Marie,' he managed to say at last. 'Think of it as poor people saved. There are many lives in the balance, and for good or ill you're saving them. May I leave you now to make preparations?'

Marie nodded. 'I'll come down at two to open the door,' she said. 'Good-night, Drury.'

She did not turn her head to look as he walked away; her thoughts had already flown back to the same old trouble, and Devignes.

'If I might only explain!' she was murmur-

ing over and over to herself. 'And oh, I'm so, so tired!'

She put her head on the cold stone, sinking down on the grass in an attitude that betrayed the wholesale abandonment of hope, courage, and strength. But her tears were all shed, she had no more. Burnt in upon her soul instead was the memory of just one sentence of all that had passed during the previous twenty-four hours.

'If I could make you realise what a shameful part it is you're playing!'

'I do understand now,' murmured Marie, gasping out the words between her fingers tightly pressed against her dry hot aching eyelids. 'I do understand—better. If I might only explain!'

When mental indecision has reached a certain pitch, the theoretical aspect of life is simply swallowed up in its practical demands. Marie carried all her indecision, all her questionings, all her griefs and doubts to bed—and at two o'clock next morning was at the south-west door waiting for Drury's knock. He was alone when she opened it, but she saw dim dark forms waiting in the shadow of the cypress trees, and carrying something between them. Marie averted her eyes. She wanted no reminder of last night. The business must be got through and as quickly as possible, that was all her concern. She showed

Drury in, and in a few brief sentences explained the scheme of accommodation.

Just inside the door, up a little winding stair to the right, was the lumber room she had had in It was full of old furniture, dusty and worm-eaten, piled up in every corner. window, high up in the wall, looked straight into the cypresses, and no sun ever penetrated through it. At the far end a door concealed by a fruit press standing at right angles to it opened into another smaller room, which was lighted only by a window looking into the house passage. Marie pointed this out as an advantage: it would be easy, without being observed, to see whoever chanced to come along, and, if search were again made, and the outer door blocked, escape might be possible by way of the house. second room led into a third, which in its turn opened on to a side staircase, leading straight up to the top attics. Once safely there, a veritable rabbit warren of winding passages, and rooms opening in suites one out of the other offered easy shelter to any nimble player of hideand-seek.

Marie explained all this in a low tone, and then reaching the inner staircase paused.

'Now, Drury, the key of this door remains in my possession, and I shall let nobody come into the Manor through here. The ordinary way by the passage outside would take any explorer straight into the kitchens, so I don't hesitate to leave it open. The key of the south-west door I must trust to you. If anything's wanted, you can write it down, and slip it under the door here. I'll come every day, and will undertake that whatever supplies you need you shall have. But further I refuse any responsibility. You must be personally responsible for this man, Le Clos, and his welfare. Am I clear?'

- 'Perfectly, Miss Marie.'
- 'Then I shall leave you. You can arrange the rooms and furniture as you like, and let me know of anything that may be needed when I come to-morrow. Good night.'

Drury stooped, and, unseen by her, as she paused with one hand on the lock, one foot on the staircase, lifted the hem of her frock to his lips. Even after she had gone and the door had closed, he still stood in the same place, looking steadfastly after her, the expression of his face seeming to imply some distressing mental struggle.

'Yet I must put my master first,' he muttered presently, as with eyes downcast he slowly made his way back. 'If that is what it all means, if that—bless her for an angel, Miss Marie could

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never dream of any greater evil—his life is in a peril no mere sheltering of smugglers could ever put it in. Maybe Mr. Jacques too—and in that case Miss Marie would be the first to shield him, and with herself if need be. I wish I could get at the rights, but I fear, I fear ——'

He had reached the south-west door, and now, opening it softly, he beckoned the bearers in.

CHAPTER X

THE time did not pass any more peacefully for Devignes than for Marie, although in place of mental indecision, the torture of self-questioning, and the miserable burden of an uneasy conscience, his energies and the necessity for strict analysis were directed first upon facts, and then upon the motives and actions of the people whose characters and behaviour were influencing them. In this, as he was beginning to realise, lay the key to the situation. He had played a bold stroke in descending upon the Manor House that morning, revealing his hand once for all, but looking at it all round, the result of the expedition left him feeling justified as to its wisdom. Since, though bonnet and lace had proved as innocent as millinery well could be, the ground was now completely cleared for a comprehensive placing of the whole countryside under martial law, without need for further mystery so hampering in itself to success.

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He intended to have no more half measures. The arrest of Dr. Scape, the searching of his house, the secret placing of every suspected character and cottage under surveillance, had practically culminated in this open disclosure of his purpose and real identity. He left the Manor his plan of action simplified thus far, in that the further steps of setting double sentries along the coast, and surrounding the village so as to guard every outlet, and prevent any intercourse between the people inside whether with each other or with their confederates beyond, were merely details of military organisation.

His real difficulty lay in another direction, and it was here that he knew all his diplomatic experience and powers were needed—the interacting of the various human influences by which he was beset, paralysing his hands, and, as it maddened him to realise, imperilling the success upon which so much depended. He was certain, baffled as he still was as to their exact share in it, that both Jacques and Marie were somehow deeply concerned in the plot. How far Lady Hepzibah's knowledge extended was equally a mystery to him, though he did not as yet believe her wholly innocent. His instinct warred against his reason: natural intuition with the light of events. Everything he heard of Lady Hepzibah, from

rich and poor alike, testified to a fine nobility of character and perfect integrity—her behaviour and bearing that day had been those of conscious honesty. Yet his innate suspicion of all women who had in any sense been trained in the ways of the world, and not personally proven to be trustworthy, prevented him from wholly acquitting her as he might have done had he known that she had never set foot outside Lodeswell. Jacques was, of course, implicated: steeped to the eyes, he had no doubt, in any mischief afloat that offered excitement and an outlet for his superabundant vitality. But to condemn his engaging personality as that of a wholesale criminal was quite another thing. A rogue, ready for any sort of reckless adventure, certainly; but scarcely a mean scoundrel, sheltering himself behind two helpless women! And as to Marie - Devignes put his hand a moment over his eyes as he strode slowly up the pathway of the Little Red House. It cut him to the soul even to think of her, to conjure up that pitiful little face as he had last seen it, its childishness contrasted with the misery which drove all youth for the moment from it, making the pathos doubly cruel. Nobody with any knowledge of human nature at all could have questioned the goodness of the girl's inborn character-least of all himself, but how

came she to be so mixed up in this disreputable affair? It was strangely mysterious—from first to last—her share in these proceedings.

'They certainly need one thing,' he muttered conclusively to himself as he swung in at the gate. 'And that is some one to look after them all. And I think I mean to be that man,' he added with a grim laugh.

The atmosphere of the Little Red House, as he neared it, seemed to be strangely disturbedelectrically charged to the point of explosion. From the parlour to the left as he entered were issuing the most odd growls and broken exclamations, as though of some animal in pain, and as he ran quickly across the narrow hall to investigate the trouble the door was suddenly flung open, and Miss Bullecroft came springing hurriedly out. Her delicately tinted face was mottled with weeping, and there were deep red rims round the soft eyes, shrunk to half their size, their faded hazel, drowned in tears, giving them the appearance of withered leaves under water. She scurried furtively towards the staircase, trying the while with trembling fingers to unpin a yellow rosette with long streamers which, with a Dijon rose, fastened her muslin kerchief at the neck. Through the open door the indistinguishable sounds now plainly resolved themselves into the Commandant's voice, and the disjointed sentences were clearly to be heard—

'Gay popinjays about my room . . . no, no, can't have it! Sober colours, sober. . . . Detestable all these fal-lals . . . lead to no good. . . . I hate them.

'My poor brother is not at all well-not at all himself,' interrupted Miss Bullecroft tremulously. She had evidently hoped, as Devignes realised instantaneously, to be able to reach the stairs unseen before he could enter, but foiled in this attempt to escape from the scene of embarrassment, and seeing his horrified expression, proffered her loyal little explanation in nervous haste. 'He is so upset—I am so upset—at this terrible trouble at the Manor House! Dear Lady Hepzibah! We all love her so much, and her griefs are wholly ours too. And-and-I was just wearing this rose and ribbons because they were her little gift to me-it is my birthdaybut my brother has just begged me to take them off, and put on a less bright gown just for the day—it hurts him to see anything so gay when we are all so sad. . . . It was most thoughtless of me . . . but I never dreamt when I came down this lovely morning of what it was to bring. . . . What a dreadful thing to have happened! But you only did your duty-we all know that, of course. . . . It is only so difficult when Duty means hurting one's friends, do you not agree with me? We must do what is right, but it would be so pleasant if it could be done without wounding any one, would it not?'

The look of pitiful apology on her tearbedimmed countenance, coupled with the delicate consideration for his own feelings lest her words should have implied reproach, touched Devignes to the heart.

He stooped down and took both her hands, almost reverentially, in his.

'My dear Miss Bullecroft,' he said in his kind-liest tones, 'the whole affair is quite impersonal—and, even so, entirely and wholly on my shoulders. It has nothing to do with either you or your brother, nor will it ever affect your friendship with Lady Hepzibah. She is far too fond of you, even if she were not far too just to visit my actions—done too, as you truly observe, in the course of duty—upon other people. I alone am responsible, and, believe me, I am going to be on as friendly terms at the Manor House presently as you are yourself!'

He was relieved to see that his words brought just the courage and comfort he had desired they should. Miss Bullecroft smiled through her emotion, and clung gratefully with quivering hands to the steady ones that held hers so firmly, as if some current of strength and consolation was thus actually transmitted.

'I should like to see you always there!' she exclaimed impulsively. 'How kind, how good, how strong you are! If only I could think they had always some one like you to take care of them—of dear Lady Hepzibah and Marie—I think I could be quite, quite happy. What should I have done without my dear brother's strong arm and manly presence to shield me through life? If, if only I might dare to think . . . she is so pretty, and a sweet, good child, and no one so clever with her fingers . . . she made this very rosette for me to fasten my fichu!'

She had withdrawn her hands, and was busy trying once more to detach the yellow rosette and streamers. Devignes, who had stood listening to her incoherent words, and watching the tender light illumining her features as she spoke of her friends with a smile, peculiarly soft, upon his own, took it from her as she held it out.

Miss Bullecroft watched him as he turned it slowly over in his hands, successive waves of emotional feeling passing over her face. She opened her lips to speak—hastily retreated towards the stairs—mounted to the fourth step hesitatingly, and then, as if fired with sudden resolve, drew her skirts about her so as to facilitate instant flight if necessary and bent confidingly towards him.

'And I may not wear them, for my brother has taken such a dislike to them. . . . But if you cared to keep it. Dear Marie's work . . . so pleased . . . pray accept!'

The words came pulsating out in frightened little gasps hardly above a whisper, and before the last was well out of her mouth Miss Bullecroft had disappeared. Devignes caught the last flutter of a peacock-hued gown, and then found himself alone, the rose and the yellow ribbons in his hands, and only inarticulate murmurs emanating from the parlour to break the silence. He put both flower and rosette carefully away into an inner pocket, and went to interview his host. The Commandant was sitting stiffly upright in a high straight-backed chair, his feet, still booted and spurred, stuck out rigidly in front of him, and his arms defiantly folded across his chest. His thick bushy eyebrows were drawn down over his eyes till they appeared only like two fire-heated pinpoints, fixed, as if their very glance could shrivel, upon Lady Hepzibah's bonnet. Squarely set upon a small table exactly in front of him stood the box, and gracefully balanced upon the edge, its curling white plumes and floating streamers of cobweb-texture the very incarnation of all that was innocent, harmless, unoffending, reposed the Bonnet in full view. The Commandant, between fierce gasping whiffs of his pipe, unlighted, but firmly wedged between his teeth, was still apostrophising it in no measured terms when Devignes came into the room; but his voice then ceased abruptly, he put down his pipe, and burst into a loud, discordant, though would-be careless laugh.

'So you were mistaken, after all, ha ha!' he began, the harsh tones having so little real merriment in them that they jarred painfully with the words and the forced smile upon his face. 'But you see I was right—she did make it herself. Well? Ha, ha. What have you to say now? I was right, hey? I said she was telling the truth. So she was. Hey? What? Nothing to say, of course. I was right. You're all wrong, you see. Wrong! wrong! wrong!

He hurled the words out as if they were so many brickbats, every one of which he hoped was going to reach some vital spot, but Devignes only walked quietly round and sat down as if nothing unusual was the matter.

Just now respect for the unshaken loyalty of this honest, if thick-witted, colleague of his was only outweighed by the sympathy which he felt for the soreness that the morning's humiliation had so evidently occasioned. Here at least was a man who understood what the ideal of friendship should be. Even in this moment of bitter suffering under the blow inflicted so undeservedly by the Beloved Hand, he could only be triumphant in that that hand was proved clean! His nerves were at the jarring point when a scapegoat is necessary, and Devignes, fully-recognising this, was quite pleased to supply the essential in his own person.

'Own it!' snarled the Commandant, brandishing his pipe, and slapping his other hand down on the table till it creaked in heavy sympathy. 'Own it like a man! That is not the cipher-lace, and Lady Hepzibah spoke the truth!'

'Why, certainly I see it is not the cipher-lace, and I own with pleasure you were right,' said Devignes cordially enough, and ignoring any little inconsistencies with former speeches and convictions in the Commandant's present statements. 'And I certainly beg your pardon for any offence or pain I may have given you in the matter. After all, disagreeable as it has been, this is one happy result of our morning's work. Lady Hepzibah's bonnet and lace stand exonerated, and we can admire them as works of skill as much as we

please. Don't take it too much to heart, either, Bullecroft,' he added kindly. 'It was only your duty, and my responsibility at that. Take it back to-morrow, when Lady Hepzibah has had a good night's rest, and the natural vexation at our intrusion has passed—it will, for she's a sensible woman, I take it; and if she has the character and nature you have described to me'—he paused diplomatically, and was delighted to see the clouds lifting—'she will presently enjoy a laugh over it all with you and a cup of tea.'

'I wish I could think so,' replied the Commandant gloomily, but his voice was smoother, and the glance with which he now surveyed the unlucky head-covering was more kindly and serene. He lit his pipe again, and began puffing gently at it.

Devignes got up, and marched with leisurely steps round box and bonnet.

'It's a pretty thing!' he observed judicially. 'And now quite historical and romantic. Persuade Lady Hepzibah to tell you all about the lace and those convent-days, Bullecroft. What a pleasant meeting I foresee when you meet again, and talk all this over! It will be an amusing episode to look back upon that you will never forget. Go and take it back yourself—this box—and make your explanation.

Remember I'm the man who ordered it to be done, and she's quite reasonable enough to know how entirely everything you did was by my order, and had nothing to do with yourself or your own wishes.'

'I will take it to my sister, and ask her to fix a time for us both to go over and return it,' exclaimed the Commandant, his conscience smiting him as he recollected that sister's docile retreat before his irritable outburst. 'And as Lady Hepzibah offered it to her to copy, no doubt she will like to look it well over now, and then we will take it back.'

He rose briskly from his chair, lifted the bonnet with deferential if awkward fingers, dropped it into the box, and strode unceremoniously out of the room, his mind, incapable of holding two ideas at a time, now completely occupied with his new project. Devignes and his grievances were alike forgotten.

Devignes looked after him with a smile of amusement; then, dismissing the subject from his mind, decided to make his way out again into the open. Like Marie, he seemed to be choked within walls. A sudden longing for solitude and space, the calm grandeur of heaven and sea, had seized upon him—he craved for the soothing they only had power to bestow.

As he paused for a moment at the gate and turned to fasten the latch, involuntarily he raised his eyes, and they fell upon the wide-opened window of the little drawing-room and the figures of the Commandant and Miss Bullecroft standing just within. Miss Bullecroft had obediently changed her gown for one of a more subdued tint, looking with her plaintive face above the pale grey which now enwrapped her like a lost wisp of twilight.

She was in the act of holding the bonnet reverently suspended above her head—evidently afraid to take the bold step of actually donning it, but this compromise satisfying both her desire and conscientious scruples. Before her stood the Commandant, apparently posing as mirror and judicial adviser. An interested smile now wreathed his rugged countenance, and the benignity with which he was surveying his sister spoke well—so Devignes thought with a fleeting laugh—for the soothing influence even the most trivial of life's possessions may sometimes have power to wield over the vagaries of human passion.

CHAPTER XI

MEANTIME Lady Hepzibah remained secluded. The Commandant went round the following morning, but was denied entrance, and Miss Bullecroft fared no better.

She left her room, however, the next day, looking bent and aged indeed-for sleepless nights and harrowing agitation leave marks when one is no longer quite young which cannot be easily shaken off or effaced-but perfectly selfcontained. Marie herself, sinking from sheer reaction into sound slumber the moment her head touched the pillow, only woke late in the day, after some fifteen hours of unbroken sleep, to feel as though everything she had gone through was but some unholy dream. This is the supreme beauty of being young. 'At any rate,' she said to herself, leaning out of the window in sudden reawakened consciousness of the glory of a summer evening, 'nothing worse now, surely, can happen!'

Lady Hepzibah greeted her as though it was

years since they had parted. Folding her closely in her arms, she covered her with caresses, murmuring gentle consolations as if consciencestricken that, absorbed in her own humiliation, she should have forgotten the grief Jacques' untoward departure must have caused his devoted sister. Marie, while returning her kisses, grateful, eagerly grateful, for the affection, could have choked with shame. But though Lady Hepzibah could hardly do enough in affectionate solicitude for her niece, not a word passed her lips, not a question did she ask with respect to the cause of all their distress. She only alluded once to the events of the previous day, and that was when Marie, coming suddenly on the Wednesday afternoon into her bed-room, found her on her knees, engaged in disinterring the bonnet from its box.

'It has come back,' she said. Her face was hidden at the moment, but her voice sounded clear almost to harshness.

'Yes,' said Marie, with tingling cheeks. She had no words of consolation or sympathy to proffer; she could only stand there in silence, her heart sinking with self-abasement, and watch her aunt, now pulling out with lingering affection each quill of lace, now gently twining her fingers inside the curling plumes, and now smoothing

down the rich satin tie-strings almost as if all represented something human.

Lady Hepzibah seemed to be lost in thought, and Marie wondered painfully if angry resentment was in her mind. But when she looked up there were tears glistening on her cheeks, and only a pathetic little smile curving her lips.

'I shall never care to wear it again, child! But I shall keep it always by me as a reminder to myself!'

She was close beside the bed, and as she spoke laid the bonnet down on the green satin brocade coverlet, which set off its delicate beauty to perfection, and then stood looking pensively at it.

'It is good sometimes to be made to feel how absolutely unimportant one is, after all, in the eyes of the world generally, when one has lived so long in a little world of one's own, and always considered to be in the right. I have prided myself too much, I fear, been too secure, held my head too high. I thought every one must know'—she stumbled a little over the words, but went on bravely—'must know that the Deanes were above suspicion of anything unworthy. I should have known better—I was once a woman of the world. You shall trim me a very plain little bonnet, black or grey I think it shall be, my love, instead.

Ah, pride and vanity, vanity and pride—we are bound to fall, dear child, some day!

She began wrapping up each little frill of trimming on the bonnet in tissue paper, a separate piece to each bit, with slow deliberate care, murmuring the words over and over to herself in a gentle little monotone the while.

'Pride and vanity—ah, yes! Vanity and pride—pride and vanity!'

Apparently she had quite forgotten her niece's presence, and thankfully realising it, her hands held to her hot smarting cheeks, Marie slipped noiselessly out of the room, her one craving to reach fresh air-space-quiet-oblivion. Back upon her, in that moment, had rushed in full force every tithe of the bitterness sleep had for the time being swept away. Precipitating herself down the stairs, blindly making her way outanyhow, anywhere into the open-she cannoned right against some one who was just entering, and with a mutual exclamation of dismay did she recognise Devignes. She was already in such a state of nervous perturbation that self-possession was scattered to the winds, and she only stood and stared at him-stared at him as if she saw some awful and terrifying spectre from the other world, faintly and incoherently stammering out a greeting.

Devignes himself became a little white—she had been so much in his thoughts that to see her now suddenly before his very eyes was a little disconcerting, but it was not in him to lose self-possession, and he spoke quite collectedly.

- 'I have come from your brother. He sends messages to your aunt and to you. May I see Lady Hepzibah?'
- 'I—I don't know,' faltered Marie. Her cheeks were crimson, and she hardly knew what she was doing or saying.
 - 'I've frightened you,' said Devignes.

It was useless to attempt a conventional attitude, for consciousness of each other's near vicinity was too vivid. There was a pause, neither of them appearing capable of saying anything further, but Devignes, looking straight into Marie's wide-opened eyes, dark with that unreasoning fear, vowed to himself that, come what might, he would move heaven and earth to get them to look at him—well, differently.

Marie was possessed with but the one idea that had been haunting her every thought of him. Naturally candid and impulsive, she was now so disconcerted that it slipped out unawares.

'I wish I could explain!'

And then it was that with a flash of intuition both realised the length of the way they had gone together, though it was but four days since first they had met. But the rapid march of events makes time measureless; is it not rather to be gauged by the variety of emotions that can be called into existence by the influence and presence of any one person in any given period of our lives, whether hours, weeks, years?

'Would you like to explain?' repeated Devignes, and a gleam of triumph leapt for a moment to his eyes, for he knew, and Marie knew too, directly the words had left her lips, that underlying them was the germ of an acknowledgment that an influence more potent than anything which had before entered her life was holding her in thrall. Was it disloyal to Jacques—this first hint of a wavering allegiance?

Devignes realised the truth, because when one is versed in diplomacy, and is constantly investigating human nature, one seldom makes mistakes with regard to the one person upon whose character and nature one is bringing all one's hardly earned knowledge, in the understanding only love can give, to bear. And Marie was essentially too simple to be able to deceive even berself.

- 'I mean I mustn't,' she added.
- 'No?' Devignes pulled a chair gently towards her, as they stood in the hall, and as she instinc-

tively obeyed his gesture, sat down beside her. He did not attempt to come very near, but he watched every movement narrowly. 'Miss Marie,' he said gently, 'I don't think I will ask you to explain anything. But I thank you for wishing it; it is a mark of your confidence I value.'

She looked questioningly at him.

He spoke very softly then.

'We must trust, whether we understand or not, in cases where we would like to love.'

And then he looked away, for the colour flooded Marie's face almost painfully, but persisted still.

'You agree with me?'

Then Marie, with quick impulse, faced him, wringing her hands together with a sort of impotent gesture, because words were so inadequate.

'Oh, I had rather you distrusted, I—I can't be any better yet. I must go on. I—I don't want to be trusted—yet.'

The thought of the Frenchman had flashed into her mind. She had momentarily forgotten his existence, and the part she must still play in the drama.

'Yet?' repeated Devignes, his eyes never leaving her face for a moment. 'When may I, then? What does yet mean?'

- 'I mustn't be trusted,' Marie faltered desperately.
- 'I think I will be the judge,' answered Devignes.

Then they saw Lady Hepzibah coming slowly down the stairs, and Marie got up and went out, while Devignes stepped forward to meet her.

With very simple dignity Lady Hepzibah gave him her hand. There was no sign even of consciousness that their last meeting had been anything but friendly. She had, indeed, so far humbled herself before her God in the past twenty-four hours that there was no room for any lingering resentment towards man. After all, innocence and integrity do not present themselves to one's notice as requiring emphatic assertion. Lady Hepzibah was meeting Devignes now, too, on another ground—as a hostess receiving a guest.

'I am a bearer of messages from your nephew,' said Devignes. 'And if I might say a few words to you in private I should be glad.'

Lady Hepzibah inclined her head gravely, and led the way into the peacock parlour. Devignes brought forward a chair, handed her to it, placed a stool under her feet, and then, perceiving that a slanting ray of light was in her eyes, brought her from a distant table a little fan, and went over to readjust the blind. Lady Hepzibah looked pleased as she accepted his attentions; these little acts of special courtesy and consideration insensibly had the effect of smoothing away much of the soreness which recent events had occasioned to her sensitive temperament.

'I have felt myself to be in a false and very uncomfortable position with regard to you, Lady Hepzibah. And I want, so far as I can, to make an explanation to you. Will you allow me to speak?'

Lady Hepzibah signified assent. She was not sure that now she was not just a little curious.

'It is a very difficult task that I have been sent down here to carry through. I find every man's hand against me in the discharge of my duty, although it is simply on behalf of national safety and welfare. My only chance I find is to strike swiftly, suddenly, and at once, without its being possible for any warning to be given. That was why we descended in such a crude manner upon you. It is not in my power to tell you the exact nature of that business—but will you accept my present word, on the faith of a gentleman, that only the exigencies of the case prompted my action of the other day, and condone it accord-

ingly? Will you trust me—I ask it, Lady Hepzibah, as a member of a family well known to yours—so far?'

'You leave me nothing to condone,' said Lady Hepzibah after a pause, but with a dignity that invested the simple words with a world of meaning, and Devignes, understanding just what the tacit acknowledgment of his apology implied, bowed silently, and then went on without further explanation.

'Then I may speak again? Your nephew is now out of the way—out of harm's way'—he smiled significantly. 'It is frequently the object of the guilty to implicate the innocent, Lady Hepzibah,' he added, and she nodded as if she had fathomed the meaning underlying his words, her brows drawn together in deep thought, while one hand played meditatively with her fan. Lady Hepzibah was shrewd enough when once her thoughts were on the right track.

'And you are left here unprotected, you and your niece. These are troublous times. Will you let me come in as often as I can, openly, and in the eyes of all, while he is away? Believe me, my presence here may be more of a safeguard than you think. Lady Hepzibah, I beg that you will give me this right.'

Lady Hepzibah raised her eyes at the ring of

urgency in his tones, with her face full of mild perplexity.

'Lord Carisbrooke, could you not trust me more thoroughly?'

Devignes stepped back abruptly, and began a hasty stride up and down the room, Lady Hepzibah closely watching him, until presently he halted beside her chair.

'It would involve so much that is painful to you, so much that if known only to myself, as it is now, can presently be easily swept away, forgotten, obliterated altogether, that I beg you will I make this proposition wholly in not ask it. your interests so far-because if it is known that I am constantly here, instituted as your protector -of itself that will prevent this house or grounds being used illegitimately. We are setting sentinels -I tell you frankly-on every other house of consequence in the place, and every cottage is to be overlooked. And if you want further assurance -yes, I will speak openly-under no false pretences will I come where my own personal feelings and interests are concerned—if, Lady Hepzibah, presently, I could induce your niece to regard me with any favour—will you grant me permission to pay my addresses to her? Will you believe me now when I implore to be allowed to protect you both where it seems to me that it is necessary?'

The vibrating thrill of passion in his voice as he spoke the last words did somewhat to rouse Lady Hepzibah from the stupor of amazement into which this unexpected turn to the conversation had plunged her.

She was so startled, indeed, that for some minutes it was in vain that she tried to collect her scattered senses and summon sufficient composure to her aid to be able to reply. He stood stiff and erect before her, with ill-disguised, almost irritable impatience. The sight of him forced her to say something.

'I could have—so far—no objection on any personal grounds, Lord Carisbrooke,' she replied, hesitating and stammering, poor startled lady, almost as much as if it were she herself that he was proposing to marry. 'But—but—...'

Devignes dropped on one knee beside her.

If they had been less absorbed in the actual present it might well have occurred to either one or the other what a strange reversal of proceedings a day may bring forth! But Devignes was in earnest, and since he had ever been accustomed to concentrate all his energies, body, mind, and spirit, upon whatever for the time being he set his hand to accomplish, there was no room now for him to contemplate either past or future. And Lady Hepzibah, if she did experi-

ence just one momentary thrill of triumph in regarding the man, could not, as a true woman, help forgiving everything to the lover.

Two hours later they were still talking together, pacing round and round the gardens, Lady Hepzibah leaning on his arm, while it was easy to see by the attitude of each to the other how intimate their conversation had become. Marie, who had sought the refuge of her own room, slipping in by a side door, saw it from her window above in a storm of conflicting feelings.

What did it mean!

The real solution never once occurred to her; one thing and one only, so it seemed to her, could be the raison d'être of his visit, and surely, one thing only could, after recent events, have produced this strange, this unnatural comradeship?

They were leaguing together—that must be it!

Perhaps he had imparted to Lady Hepzibah all that he suspected—he could not know—about that unlucky lace, from the time when he had first seen it that Saturday of their first meeting. Perhaps he was asking Lady Hepzibah what she could tell or guess about it. She could not have forgiven everything so easily otherwise! No, he must have explained. Oh, but suppose he told about that meeting in Dr. Scape's house!

Marie sank down on her knees at the window, well hidden behind the curtain, and watched with strained eyes and sinking heart the figure bending so courteously towards his companion, as he helped her over some rough bit of gravel. He moved his head at the moment, so that Marie caught full view of the straight clear-cut features, with the quiet self-contained expression masking the masterful intellect and power of character which any student of physiognomy must have known lay hidden beneath.

Marie had seen many sides to this man's nature, brief as their intercourse had been, and she needed no occult power to understand the irresistible force, the dangerous fascination of such a combination. But even in that moment of sheer pride in watching him, with an odd thrill as she realised how interest was slowly resolving into a personal right in him, she was seized with deadly fear, as of a creature caught in the toils of some strong current of feeling not fully comprehended.

It seemed as if at every step she took the earth was cut away from beneath her feet. Jacques was gone—was Lady Hepzibah to go? 'She would never, never love me again if she knew,' thought Marie miserably—and what did he mean?

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'And what am I to do?' she cried out at last. But in the very moment of that self-abandonment came the reaction and then the necessity for doing something—something definite. She had told him not to trust her because Jacques had trusted her to undertake a task for him, and till he released her that at any rate must be carried to its full accomplishment. Conceal the Frenchman, help him to get away, wind up all that coil—these were imperative claims holding first place. Then, when he was safely gone, perhaps she could manage to see Jacques, perhaps she might get some message to him even before, and then she would explain to him and ask leave to make it all clear.

'But until then'—Marie set her teeth hard—
'whether he trusts me or not, and whether I can trust him or not, and whether he has told, or whether Aunt Hepzibah still knows nothing more, I must go on, I must keep it all just as secret as ever—do my best.'

She made her resolve standing at the window, and with her eyes fixed on Devignes, as coming slowly up the middle path the two faced the house. So uprightly he bore himself, such a strong reposeful presence, such a noble personality—she choked back her tears, for it was surely time she went to see how her prisoner

fared, and what time could be better, with both inquisitors absorbed in each other?

She found tinder and flint, remembering, with that sort of mechanical precision which thinks of every little practical detail when the mind is really wholly swallowed up in some great misery or anxiety, that the stone staircase was absolutely unlighted, took a candle with her, put on Jacques' long dark coat, and then, creeping noiselessly out of her room, sped down the long empty corridors, without pausing to look to right or to left until she found herself at the head of the steep winding steps.

CHAPTER XII

SHE tapped softly at the little door on the staircase before opening it, and waited some minutes, but apparently Drury did not hear her, so turning the key gently in the lock, in she went. Two narrow steps led down into the room, and she paused before descending them to snuff the flaring wick of her candle, intending to call out before going further, so as to let Drury know that she was there. It was with a shock of surprise then that she caught the faint murmur of voices from within the further rooms. It was impossible that it could be Drury and the sick man talking together; besides, there were certainly more than two persons speaking. What did it mean?

She walked down the room to within a pace or two of the second door, which stood ajar, and then called Drury by name. Instantly there was a hush; then came a sort of indefinite shuffling, more like the scrambling of soft-pawed cats than human feet; and then, after a minute or two of silence, she heard a step and Drury came out of

the darkness towards her. Marie could not see him well, for he carried no light, and her candle was guttering horribly and throwing weird shadows, but it crossed her mind that he seemed disconcerted at the sight of her.

He stood quite still, grasping the door-handle almost as if he feared she was going to force her way in.

'I called, Drury,' she said, 'and knocked before unlocking the door, but you did not seem to hear me. Is all well? And do you want anything?'

'No,' said Drury, and stopped abruptly. He remained blocking the doorway, and kept looking in a furtive manner first to one side and then to the other as she faced him.

'Did I hear voices?' asked Marie straightly.

Drury hesitated. His pallid face was too set in a sort of hard endurance to show anything of what he might be feeling, but the shifty look in his usually candid eyes struck her as disagreeable. Under ordinary circumstances he could have lied well enough, but although he would have preferred not to have had the necessity, he did not intend to speak aught but truth to her.

'If I did, Drury, you must let me know without any concealment who and what the people

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are that you have here. I am responsible in this house.'

Drury heaved a sigh, and rubbed one hand wearily over his forehead.

'Yes, you did hear voices, Miss Marie. There are two French gentlemen, friends of M. Le Clos, come to see if—if they can take him away. We were talking over some plan.'

Marie looked Drury steadily in the face. It was curious, and she found herself at that very crisis wondering at it, that whereas indecision of the most miserable kind had her as a prey at all other times, and particularly in all matters that concerned her moral and mental attitude, yet on such an occasion as this, directly it came to a question of definite action, she not only knew at once what to do, but had no hesitation in immediately acting upon that knowledge. Instinctively, as had happened before in Doctor Scape's house when interviewing Thwaites, she asserted authority, and made it felt.

'You will take me in, Drury. I wish to meet them.'

Drury shuffled from one foot to the other.

'It is simply an impossible position, an impossible responsibility, if strangers and foreigners are to come and go as they please, unknown to me, in this house. The matter is to be discussed;

very good, but I must know how it is to be carried out. Look on me as if I were Mr. Jacques himself, not merely acting for him. Lead the way in, Drury.'

The tension of the last few hours perhaps lent sharpness to her tones. At any rate, Drury submitted in silence. He took the guttering candle from her, shaded it carefully with one hand so that its light might show the way more clearly, and preceded her into the porch-room.

The window had been carefully darkened by black cloth hung across it, and the only light came from a couple of tallow dips fixed in two empty whisky bottles standing on a wooden table in the middle of the room. All the furniture and lumber had been pulled about and so disposed that one corner was quite shut off by a screen and two tall oak presses. Another screen with two or three bureaus and chairs piled high one upon the other made a sort of high bulwark, shutting off a small space round the outer door which led into the passage.

Drury signed towards the screened-off corner as they passed.

'We have him there, quite hidden in a moment should we chance to be disturbed. We moved the lumber like that on purpose. Sit here, Miss Marie.'

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He moved some things from an oak bench in the centre and cleared part of the room.

'I will ask those gentlemen to come out.

M. Clotilde, Colonel Leverd!'

At mention of their names two tall and closely muffled figures stepped out of the darkness in the enclosure by the outer door, and bowed profoundly.

Marie refused Drury's seat with a gesture. Some instinct made her prefer to remain standing. She wasted no time in preliminaries, but spoke straight to the point.

'We have one common object, messieurs, as I understand, one that means the saving of a human life. We had better consult together freely. You are, I understand, friends of this unfortunate gentleman?'

Both figures again bowed in silence. They wore masks, but Marie became disagreeably conscious of glittering eyes keenly cognisant of her every word and gesture. She went on more frigidly, and with additional gravity and reserve:

'You probably are aware how it comes about that M. Le Clos is concealed here. It is imperative that as soon as possible he should be removed. The house is watched, and it is unsafe. What do you propose to do?'

She paused, and then the taller of the two

stepped forward. He gave his companion, unperceived by Marie, a touch with his elbow as he did so. What this implied was shown by both men removing their masks.

'I have the honour to introduce myself as Colonel Leverd de la Motte,' said he. 'May I present to you my friend and companion M. Clotilde de la Marche?'

He spoke in almost perfect English. His tones were so polished, his manner and bearing so dignified, and at the same time so simple, that Marie instantly thought of Devignes. The training of the two men must have been identical, she thought, whether the stranger's name and titles were fictitious or not. She was a good deal more shrewd and perhaps more suspicious than she had been five days before.

De la Motte seemed about fifty or sixty years of age; his face, clean shaven, was heavily moulded in the jaw, but his high forehead and delicate aquiline nose gave it otherwise a peculiarly refined aspect. His eyes, black as coals under overhanging bushy grey eyebrows, were piercingly bright and uncompromisingly direct in their scrutiny. Marie felt that a few days ago she might have been alarmed at encountering them, but after Devignes' no man's on earth could have had power to affect her. Devignes',

behind his narrowed lids, of that peculiar clear bright cold blue which flashes to darken like the sharp turning of a steel blade in the sun, were a thousand times more to be dreaded.

- 'We have the honour of addressing Miss Maclean?' he interrogated. 'We have often had the pleasure of meeting your brother Monsieur Jacques at the house of our good mutual friend, Dr. Scape.'
- 'Indeed?' said Marie, cudgelling her brains to try and recollect Jacques having mentioned the fact. He so seldom met any new people he did not instantly come home and describe to her, mimicking ways and speech in his inimitable manner.
- 'And your nobility in giving an asylum to our poor wounded friend, mademoiselle, is well known to us. Engraven, indeed, on our hearts.'
- 'You overrate an act of common humanity, monsieur.'
- 'Pardon me, mademoiselle, if we judge otherwise! But time presses,' he added courteously. 'Let me conclude by explaining our present plans.'
- 'Pray proceed, gentlemen,' said Marie, her head very high. She was feeling most uncomfortable.
 - 'We hope to be able to move our friend very

shortly. But the means of transit are difficult. We ourselves are practically helpless. Drury will have to be responsible for all arrangements. So far as we have decided anything, he proposes waiting for some dark night, watching for a good, and of course the first practicable opportunity, and then getting le pauvre homme off in a boat—risking detection, of course. But one must always risk when there is anything to be gained. We can have no privileges without responsibilities, mademoiselle!

'But why delay?' asked Marie. 'If you are able to go and return, would it not be possible equally well to take him with you?' She spoke bluntly. A vague feeling of uncertainty as to how far the appearance of these men on the scene was properly accounted for by M. de la Motte's explanation was creeping into her mind. M. de la Motte, scanning her face closely, appeared to divine something of this.

'Ah, mademoiselle,' he observed suavely, 'I see you are not quite sure of us! I must leave M. Drury, our good Dr. Scape's confidant, to reassure you as to our credentials. Naturally you find us here in a false position.'

The smile of lenient sarcasm discernible on his face made Marie feel suddenly ashamed. She blushed, and did not like to repeat her question. He answered it however with a pathetic little gesture towards his companion, as though the simile touched some mutually sad reminiscence.

- 'We are but birds of passage to fly and take refuge where we may! We come and go, 'tis true, risking our lives at every turn. But could we wittingly drag a man sick unto death heedlessly into danger of that sort? Oh no, mademoiselle, you would be the first to advise caution there; with the able-bodied and strong none is necessary.'
- 'Yes,' said Marie, and only remembered afterwards, so great was the magnetic influence his words and manner exercised upon her, how evasive those words had been. She would have liked to know where they had come from at that moment, and whither they were going, but felt herself quite unequal to suggesting such an explanation.
- 'We will, of course, through Drury, keep you well acquainted with our plans,' he went on. 'But as yet we can settle little. Would it be asking too much of you, mademoiselle, to meet us again here—say to-morrow? Meantime I hope to have hit upon some definite plan of action.'

He glanced at his companion. Brief as the glance was, Marie intercepted it, and it roused in her the same vague feeling of something being concealed, something not quite open. The next

moment she was blaming herself for the thought, all at once recognising in herself the presence of a spirit of suspicion which shamed her!

'How I must have changed! What a horrid person I have become!' was her unspoken comment. Why should she distrust the word of these gentlemen—for gentlemen they most certainly were?

'But if I come to-morrow will it be to find some plan matured?' she asked at last with some decision. 'Gentlemen, this must end quickly. Your presence here makes me able to say so the more decidedly. It is a reason why your friend can go and must go. Will you undertake that he shall do so immediately? Will you promise me that a day or two shall end this?'

'Most assuredly, dear mademoiselle,' replied M. de la Motte instantly. 'We will at once arrange a plan. Never would we wish to trespass one moment longer than is absolutely necessary upon your generosity and forbearance. If we may meet you here to-morrow? About half-past four?'

Marie rapidly reviewed the situation. She saw no other solution. 'I will come,' she said gravely. 'And meantime I will bid you goodnight. Drury, come with me and carry the light.'

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The two Frenchmen bowed to the very ground as she turned to leave them. Drury had been standing close behind her during the colloquy, hidden from her view, but his face expressing almost every gradation of discomfort and uneasiness as he listened and watched. He took up one of the dips, and led the way back in silence, but as soon as they had reached the little door to the staircase Marie stopped him.

- 'Drury, tell me, are those men what they profess to be—names, titles, and so on? Answer truthfully.'
 - 'Yes, Miss Marie. I believe them to be so.'
 - 'Did they come to Dr. Scape's?'
 - 'They did often.'
 - 'Did Mr. Jacques know them?'

Drury hesitated. 'That I can't say. I don't know.' He snuffed the candle hastily with one hand as he answered, and sneezed violently.

- 'Did you know they were coming to-night?'
- 'No, Miss Marie, I did not.'
- 'One thing more. Do you know where they are going now?'
- 'I'm not sure,' answered Drury. 'But I'll get the whole business through as soon as ever I can. You may trust me for that.'

He spoke with such emphasis that Marie felt convinced he was speaking truth. For the rest she felt herself caught in such toils that further struggle was hopeless. She could only wait some development. So without further question she opened the little door, bade him a curt goodnight, and went up the staircase quickly.

Drury walked back wringing his hands restlessly together.

'If only I could know whether Mr. Jacques were in it! I don't trust these Frenchmen. But if so ——'

He found the porch-room on his return very fairly illuminated by four dips stuck in four bottles, placed at the corners of a card-table improvised by means of two chairs with an ironing-board laid across. The two Frenchmen were already seated when Drury came in. They nodded pleasantly to him as he went over to the sick man in the inner partition, and proceeded with their game without comment. But they seemed to be exchanging a good many remarks to each other in the intervals of cutting and dealing. He could catch fragments of conversation now and again above the monotonous shuffling of the cards or the chink of coin, and later, when they called for hot water and brandy, and he came forward to wait upon them, he found the cards thrown down and the two men deep in a low-toned and most animated consultation.

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He could hear nothing of what they said, but hours after they had abandoned play, and rolling themselves up in their cloaks had thrown themselves upon the floor like good soldiers on the march disdaining hardship, he sat on beside Le Clos, tossing and muttering in delirium, his head buried in his hands, and his whole being steeped in the most profound dejection.

CHAPTER XIII

MARIE'S visit to Drury's patient had at least some definite result. She went back to her own room sure of one thing—that the time for hesitation or self-questioning had gone by. She looked at her watch, and found it wanted thirty-five minutes to their five o'clock dinner. She dressed slowly and carefully, with minute attention to the smallest detail. Then, having a few minutes to spare, she sat down on the edge of her bed, and permitted herself to review the position.

The meaning of this last new and strange development of the situation could not, she felt, be reasoned, but must be worked out. Thought had become impossible, thought meant unnerving misery, but she was ready to face and endure, undertake and carry through anything so long as it tended towards a conclusion.

A few days must settle all. Either everything must be discovered or the suspense would end naturally. Marie felt as though at that moment she cared very little which, but was doggedly

resolved to play her part through, even though it must be blindly.

She went down to dinner to meet Lady Hepzibah, prepared for any change. The change she did find puzzled her considerably. Devignes was present, and not only did her aunt appear to have forgotten that he had ever been the cause of depression or annoyance, but never had she been more buoyant, more brisk, more brimming over with good spirits. Doubly demonstrative, too, towards her niece, it seemed as though, without thinking it necessary to give any reason for it, she was so overflowing with kindly feeling towards all her little world that it was impossible for her to keep it out of the simplest action, word, or tone.

This reassured Marie, while it left her the more free to withdraw into herself. One danger past at any rate! She sat silently through dinner, while Lady Hepzibah and Devignes carried on an animated conversation, as became the best of friends, and as if they had known each other for years. All that Marie wanted was to escape notice altogether, but she was sensitively conscious that no word or movement, probably no shade of expression on her face, passed unobserved. It was a drawback, she reflected with the cold criticism of desperation, to be amongst people

who cared for you. For the first time in her life she was wishing she were amongst strangers, and resenting the affection of which she was so sure.

After dinner the three went into the cool peacock parlour. It was not yet seven o'clock, and outside, the gardens bathed in the lights and shadows of nearing sunset looked invitingly lovely, while the upspringing evening breeze came wafting in through the open windows like a gentle challenge to follow it. Marie took up some needlework, in order to avoid the necessity of sitting idle and being obliged to talk.

'It is too beautiful an evening, child,' said Lady Hepzibah, coming up to lay her hand affectionately on Marie's curls. 'We should do better to be out! Are you tired? Come, the air will do you good.'

'I am tired,' said Marie, lifting her heavy eyes a moment. 'I would rather sit still, if you won't mind. And see how lazy I have been lately—not a stitch for days!'

She held up the strip of embroidery with a poor attempt at lightness, then caught Devignes' eyes fixed meditatively upon her, and began twisting her needle in and out with desperate energy. Every stitch had afterwards to be undone.

Lady Hepzibah said no more. She glanced at her niece's bent head, and then, unperceived

by either, across at Devignes, whose every energy appeared to be absorbed in the contemplation of the fair shining curls. A delicate smile crept over her face—it was a delicious pleasure, this secret that she was hugging to herself! With infinite tact she forbore to press the question further, but. quietly taking Devignes' arm, went with him into Marie remained sitting passively the garden. where she was, and without looking up from her self-imposed industry. But she found herself straining all her powers to catch the echo of those steady footfalls, and all at once a mist rose between her eyes and her work. Almost before she was aware of it the slow tears were rolling down her cheeks in a paroxysm of unreasonable yet overwhelming sense of desolation. She let her embroidery slip to the ground, and, leaning her elbows on her knees, covered her face with her hands. It was Devignes' voice that recalled her to herself some few minutes later, and glancing up, startled into forgetfulness of her tearstained countenance and tell-tale eyes, she saw him standing just within the window.

'Lady Hepzibah has been called away,' he said, noticing and ignoring all in the same instant her signs of distress. 'May I come in and talk to you a little? I have seen your brother since

last we met. You have never asked me how he is. He bade me give you his love.'

- 'Yes,' said Marie, and with a nervous gesture upset her work-basket. The reels, scissors, buttons, and hooks went tumbling about in every direction, and Devignes came forward with a laugh to pick them up.
- 'Oh, pray allow me! I beg you to sit still. He has made friends with every one in the Fort, and is enjoying himself immensely. I left him playing piquet with buttons for coin—I've promised to take him proper change to-night. He keeps them all in tremendous spirits.'

Marie said nothing, furtively wiping her eyes, and only bitterly conscious of the contrast, were this account true, between her lot and that of her co-conspirator. Of course she was glad, very glad, but surely it was a little hard, at this moment of all others, to have the wretchedness of her own isolation thrust upon her.

Devignes noted the added shadow on her face, and attributed it to its rightful cause and source. He determined, however, to ignore entirely that anything appeared to be amiss—she should learn to trust him, give her confidence unasked. Gathering everything in one fell swoop into the basket, he drew up a chair and sat down close beside her.

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'Now I'll put it properly in order,' he said gaily. 'It is shockingly untidy.'

His head was bent over the basket, hands and eyes fully occupied. Marie let her work remain in her lap, and leant back against the rail of the high chair in which she was sitting. In this position she could watch, without his knowledge, his deft slender fingers winding reels. and unravelling knotty skeins of silk. He seemed much too busy to notice what she was doing, or where looking. There was certainly nothing to be afraid of in his present mood; it might have been just Miss Bullecroft or Lady Hepzibah sitting beside her, except that it was quite different. And a curious feeling came over her then as of some burden quickly slipping awayas though everything else was a dream, and only this quiet sense of happy security real.

Nothing else mattered; she only asked to be allowed just to stay exactly where she was, thought and even feeling lulled to a calm content, while the quick fingers went in and out with their task of winding and untwisting. They seemed to know instinctively that there was but the one way—the right way—of doing even these simple little things.

'Yet you can never have done anything much of the kind before,' murmured Marie, not realising

that she was speaking her thoughts aloud, and Devignes looked up, though he answered quite naturally.

'You think I'm doing it well?'

Marie nodded. She had forgotten that her one desire during that evening had been to escape from this man, it seemed so natural now to have him sitting there; she had, indeed, an idea that were he to get up and go away she would feel frightened, just as she used to feel when, as a child, waking up in the night, she had found the candle out and the nurse gone away.

'Your aunt has forgiven my intrusion here the other day,' observed Devignes in even tones, and carefully refraining from so much as a glance at her. 'She has promised to let me come in here as often as I can while your brother is away—will that please or displease you?'

He looked at her suddenly, and Marie crimsoned, as the thought of what she would like to feel, and what she must feel with that dreadful secret hanging over her, flashed into her mind. The key of the little door was pressing against her neck now, and unwittingly she put up her hand to feel that it was safe.

- 'I don't know,' she faltered at last, since he waited for a reply.
 - 'Is there any reason why it should displease

- you?' His tone was insistent for all its quietness. He had a double motive in pressing the question home.
- 'If, knowing me as well as you do now, I had asked you that question, say, a month ago, would you have felt as doubtful in answering?'

Marie was too unhappy and confused to speak anything but the naked truth.

- 'No.'
- 'You would have been pleased to accept my presence here as a friend?'
 - 'Yes,' said she falteringly.

Devignes made a mental note, and changed his tone.

- 'I think we may be able to get your brother the commission he wants after all. Lady Hepzibah and I have been talking it over. But I believe you'll be sorry when the time comes and he really has to leave you.'
- 'Oh, no! Glad!' exclaimed Marie impulsively.

What a possible outlet, a clean sweep of all this horrid business the idea suddenly presented! Away, far away from all these degrading influences—oh, any separation would be better!

'You think a career necessary to a man? You are right. It keeps one's superfluous energies occupied,' said Devignes, reading her like an open book. And he went on to say pleasant things of Jacques, for whom, indeed, he had conceived a strong liking, repaid, as he had hoped was to be the case, by a quick wave of tenderness lightening the trouble which lingered still in her voice and eyes, self-pity and consciousness alike swept away at the introduction of a theme so dear to her heart. It was an easy road to her confidences, he reflected, leaning his head on his hand, and watching with an intentness he had no need to disguise, so absorbed did Marie quickly become in the topic, her mobile face reflecting each thought as a pool reflects the passing clouds of a changeful spring day.

She was presently telling him, forgetful of caution or reserve under the quiet interest of those deepset eyes, all and everything of their childhood, each fresh confidence revealing, as he was thankful to recognise, only further glimpses of a selfless nature, simple and loyal in its faiths and beliefs, untainted by any breath of worldliness, or those affectations which he shuddered to recollect were often the only bulwarks of character left to women who lived constantly in the artificial atmosphere of social life.

And if Marie had deliberately tried she could not have supplied a more effective defence of Lady Hepzibah than in thus artlessly revealing the nature and results of her training and example.

'But there's something she knows that's haunting her,' he muttered to himself, pacing up and down the turfed walk that evening long after Lady Hepzibah had come in, and both she and Marie had bid him good-night and retired. 'It's something too that the boy either doesn't know, or isn't sensitive enough to feel for himself. Of course it's a difficult position here for themnot a soul to give advice or exert any influence over the lad except, I suppose, Bullecroft!' He stopped to laugh softly to himself at the recollection of the various passages at arms he had already witnessed between the two. 'His advice is simply fuel to the flame, I dare swear. Meantime the boy's energies are all going to seed for lack of the right influences and outlet-dragging Miss Marie heart and soul after him. That's at the bottom of her share, I suspect now-devotion to him. And I shall never learn it from her. Her king can do no wrong, I take it! What I want to know is what exactly it was that brought her to Scape's house that night. The solution lies there.'

The broad pathway of light streaming across the garden from the lamp in Marie's room just above suddenly disappeared. He paused a moment in his ponderings to stand still beneath her window and send up all his heart in thought for her. Nor, though presently he moved away, did he go far, but wrapping himself in his cloak settled down on a bench not far off, with intent to remain for the night. Be the danger what it might, none should come to her from outside while he was there to serve as sentinel.

The moon was waxing to the end of her first quarter; in another day or two she would be full. It was the 5th of the month. There were little wavering handfuls of misty indefinite cloud rising and dispersing again over the deep depths of the summer sky; they fleeted across the moon's face, just bold enough to veil, but never to hide. The bright peeping eyes of the stars seemed laughing in good-natured mockery at such futile attempts to dim the glory of their playground. Against its western background the old Manor stood outlined in dark relief, except where under the moon-rays' gentle touch, each pane of glass down the long frontage of windows shimmered like moving water. Devignes was at home with the stars; they were always good company, with much to say-much to recall to him. So many nights had he spent with them, beneath such different skies, under such varied circumstances, in connection with so many diverse

associations, recollections, hopes, and anticipa-

Always friendly were they, always ready to serve as sympathetic interpreters of moods he hardly understood himself. He watched them now as though calling upon them as witnesses to attest the events of his past life. Silent triumphs and successes, conquests which had brought fame and fortune, steps which had meant the fulfilling of that dearest thing to man, noble ambition in his career.

Devignes had gone to no man nor woman for sympathy with these. His inner life had been his own—except when shared where it is often best understood, with Nature, the voiceless part of the scheme of Creation. He called upon her, and upon those sentinels of her night watches to witness now the crowning phase of all—since till one has found true love, the ideal that is able to absorb into itself all those accumulated powers of working, and fighting, and dreaming, the making of a career, and the fulfilling of high-souled ambitions—until then, I say, these things are but as trees whose leaves are thick, but whose prospect of fruit is unfulfilled, and life may be winter, spring, and summer—but never harvest!

It was the man's single-hearted sincerity in all that he undertook which now, when he most needed to carry others with him, stood him in good stead.

Weaker natures were absorbed into the current, and those as strong as his own respected him. Neither Lady Hepzibah, nor Jacques, nor even the Commandant, had experienced any resentment at his peremptory method of action, however it might disturb their plans. They accepted it, nor did they seek for explanations. He made it felt that he acted with sufficient reason, and that they could safely trust him.

He had won Lady Hepzibah's support by what, had he so designed it, would have been one of his finest pieces of diplomacy. He had proffered no information, satisfied no curiosity, but he found himself forgiven, and accepted as a friend, with sympathetic support in his courtship, and the way smoothed both for what he desired to do to protect the interests of the girl he hoped to make his wife, and also to serve those of his king.

Lady Hepzibah was indeed sinking to sleep at that very moment in a state of entire content. How could she be happier, as a loving woman, than in seeing her darling wooed under her own protection, by a man who in all respects answered the ideal she would have chosen for her? And if the prospect of such a marriage did appeal to her fleetingly from its more worldly standpoint, was it not legitimate to rejoice that her beloved niece, despite all drawbacks, should in her marriage pass to her rightful heritage in that social circle wherein all Lady Hepzibah's sympathies were naturally focussed? Fleetingly, I say, even so. For before all else was Lady Hepzibah a true woman, and romance and sentiment were to her more the realities of life than its material advantages.

At that moment she was burying the hatchet for good and all, as, sinking to sleep, the thought of Devignes in her heart, the Commandant excused if not forgiven, and Marie's name upon her lips, she murmured drowsily:

'And the lace will be so nice for her trousseau.'

CHAPTER XIV

DEVIGNES slept dreamlessly for two hours, and woke to find answers to a good many of his problems. He raised himself from the bench and looked at his watch. The moon was hidden; during his sleep great banks of heavy clouds had been steadily rising from the north, and he could barely see the dial face. He fancied, however, that it must be about half-past one. Another three hours or so and the sun would be up. He was rather stiff, though well accustomed to lie in the open all night long, and made his way to the turfed walk where his footsteps could not be heard, and without fear of disturbing any one he could pace up and down as his custom was when thinking deeply. His mind seemed almost preternaturally acute, and went from point to point over the events which had baulked and puzzled him, with a precision which summed up and dismissed without circumlocution. He began uttering his conclusions aloud, the connection between them dispensed with as soon as used.

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'Patience, and no hasty judgments,' said he presently, Lady Hepzibah coming first to mind. 'The Commandant understood her, and I agree with him, if character were all. But with women, as my experience goes, character per se is no guide to action, whenever feeling comes into play. I judge her, and the more I see of her confirms my opinion, to be sincere, candid, and upright. That's my unalterable opinion, I grant it, of her character. But, if she is bent on shielding either of those children, to whom she is devoted heart and soul. I'm out of court. A woman can be completely metamorphosed where she loves—another creature. It's strange! It's not that they reason out that love justifiesnot a whit. It's instinctive. For the time being, they simply assume an entirely different nature. She isn't a woman, I see that plainly, to do anything dubious on her own account, and she might not under any circumstances, but for the sake of those two I fancy, though I may be wrong, black could seem white! Well. I must hold myself prepared for that. She can be trusted in all and every other sense.'

He dismissed Lady Hepzibah from his mind.

Those two children are being used by some one, I take it, and very skilfully too, as tools.

The boy's playing the fool from sheer want of employment, and she ——'

He paused to smile tenderly. 'She would move heaven and earth to serve him. It's pretty, and it's good to see, but the whole thing's in an imbroglio, which I have to unravel, without questions or interference either.'

He reverted to the means, his brow knitted in concentrated thought.

'The next question is—the Frenchman, who must be found. Of course what we saw on Saturday was the cipher-lace, no doubt of that. I shall not ask any more questions, though, of either of them. I'll get Drury in a trap directly, though not arrest him for a day or two; things had better work to a head first. He can't get away down Channel, I think now. We could have stopped communications altogether three or four days ago if these Revenue fellows had known their business. How difficult it is to work with one's hands tied by such infernally incompetent tools! We ought to have got him that Friday night, despatches and all. It has thrown us out for days. They may well laugh in their sleeves. However, I'll arrest every man-jack of them directly I've got proper gunboats down the coast. It's useless giving the alarm till we've secured that.'

He was pacing rapidly the whole length of

the path right to the south-west angle of the house where the cypress walk met it.

M. de la Motte gave a sigh and a roll, and woke up. The room was close, with an aroma of burnt wood and brandy, the only audible sounds the heavy breathing of his companion, who lay like a log on the floor beside him, and the indistinct shuffling of bed-coverings as the wounded man tossed restlessly. A circle of light on the ceiling, above and behind the screen, showed where Drury was still keeping his watch.

'Sick men,' said De la Motte stoically, without the faintest shade of annoyance in his tones, even if they held no sympathy either, 'are unpleasant bedroom companions.'

He rose to his feet, adjusted his tumbled garments, and peeped round the screen. There were just the mattress in the corner, a bench with the roughest of sick nursing appliances upon it, a three-legged stool, and Drury with his back turned. He was bending over an improvised fire, made up of bits of shaving and wood set crosswise in a wide shallow pan. With one hand he held the saucepan over the flames, while with the other he fed them from a heap of chips at his side. There was no fireplace in either of the

rooms, and if there had been, smoke might at any moment have betrayed them. The Colonel stood watching for some five minutes, then stepped lightly forward.

'How is he, mon ami?' he asked.

Drury looked round. 'He may live another week,' he said, heavily.

The Colonel came further in, and bent over the bed. He laid his hand a moment on Le Clos' wrist, looked at him steadily, and pursed up his lips.

'A brave man, and young—such are the fortunes of war! Telle est la vie! Houp là! We can't move him.'

'There will presently be no need.'

Drury was slipping a careful arm under the pillow of his patient, and gently raising it and his head together. With his other hand he began feeding him, a spoonful at a time, coaxing him to swallow as a mother-bird might coax a sick fledgling.

'We could better take him—then,' observed the Colonel.

Drury vouchsafed no reply to this remark. His eyes were fixed sombrely on Le Clos' deathlike face, and he half turned one shoulder away as if he felt and resented the accent of cold cynicism. De la Motte looked coolly round, and then settled himself comfortably upon the one little stool.

'What became of the despatches, Drury?'

Drury had risen to warm the cup again. In that imperfect light the start he gave was unperceived, and he kept his face turned away for some moments without answering.

'I don't know, monsieur; I never saw them,' he replied presently.

De la Motte hesitated for a moment; then determined that the risk must be taken.

- 'Your master trusted you infinitely, n'est-ce pas ?'
- 'He did not confide all his secrets to me, monsieur. I was but a servant.'
- 'But he trusted you with his honour, doubtless,' observed the Colonel with shrewd emphasis.
- 'He was justified,' flashed Drury in a moment of impulse.
- 'Indeed, yes—indeed!' De la Motte having attained what he wanted spoke very soothingly. 'We all know that, good Drury. And it is precisely for that reason I have—we have—decided to trust you infinitely too. It all hinges on him. And of course,' he added in a delightfully conversational manner, 'he would be the first to hang—and you too, naturally, if one comes to think about it. We are not traitors; merely, if caught,

French refugees, or prisoners of war. We plot nothing against any Government—since ours just at present is taking a rest!

Drury winced, and De la Motte saw it.

'Which being decided, of course we can depend on you. We agreed, De la Marche and I, after talking it over last night, that it would be better to be explicit. What became of the lace this poor boy was carrying?'

'Lace? Mr. Jacques had it. Why, was it----

The Colonel nodded.

'It was at once his safeguard, his raison d'être with your ordinary smugglers who were not in the secret, and his passport to those who were! We called it the cipher-lace, the token of our whilom messengers. So pretty, and easy, and even poetical a way, wasn't it? Simplicity,' added the Colonel meditatively, and with a sarcastic glance round at his surroundings, 'is the soul of success. The actual despatches were inside. Were you present when M. Jacques got possession of it?'

Drury paused.

'We had to unroll it to dress the wound. M. Le Clos was terribly agitated at its being taken off. We did not unroll the bale. He had undone it partly, and wrapped it round himself till the

remainder could slip into a pocket. Neither Mr. Jacques nor myself knew that it meant anything beyond just an attempt at smuggling. He took it because he was, so to speak, the only gentleman present, and M. Le Clos did not seem to care to confide it to any one else. They had been talking a good deal to each other coming over in the boat. Mr. Jacques took it then. He took it innocently, I'll swear,' added Drury with agitation.

'He'll hang too if it's found, however,' remarked De la Motte pleasantly. 'What did he do with it?'

'I don't know.'

'Miss Maclean might,' suggested the Colonel.

Drury drew in a sharp breath between his teeth.

- 'No,' he said, 'I'll swear she does not.'
- 'She is devoted to her brother?'
- 'Yes.'
- 'Ah! And shares his secrets?'
- 'I don't know.'
- 'And, you think, knows nothing of all this?'
- 'I am sure she does not.'
- 'Even innocently?'
- 'No.'

By the expression on the Colonel's face Drury knew that he was not believed. Good Heaven! so this was the solution! Things were clearing

with terrible rapidity. His poor master! poor Mr. Jacques! poor Miss Marie!

And what was he to believe? That his master had been deliberately and of set purpose concerned in whatever it was these Frenchmen plotted he had no doubt. Putting together what Marie had repeated—'Treasonable correspondence'—and what he now knew in explanation of the presence of the Frenchmen, the existence of some conspiracy was only too clear. And his master was in it! Drury groaned aloud.

'We are all plunging about in the same deep water, you see,' said the Colonel. 'Don't agitate yourself, my good man, you're in excellent company. We will ask Miss Maclean what she knows when she comes. I go now to breathe some purer air. It is not for nothing we become dormice in July.' He heaved a deep yawn, took the key of the south-west door from the bench where it lay, gently putting aside Drury's intercepting hand, and noiselessly tiptoed across the room.

The night was dark, and after the close atmosphere within the warm air blew upon him with a chill refreshing blast. De la Motte stepped cautiously outside amongst the cypresses, and drew in many deep breaths of thanksgiving. As he stood hesitating a moment which way to turn

so as most safely to be able to stretch his cramped limbs, a light quick step came up in the darkness close to where he was standing. As an old campaigner nothing could escape his acute sense of hearing or vision, and he was prepared for any crisis. In a second he was on the ground, and crouching noiselessly almost on his face. Devignes halted not three yards away. He was talking softly to himself, and after standing still for the space of some five minutes, started back once more.

The Colonel strained eyes and ears, and a smile relieved the anxiety on his face as he caught the fragments of the soliloquy.

Even if they had not known each other so well in bygone days, he had dodged Devignes too often in the last week here and there not to recognise him now, though it was but a dim outline of a moving figure that came to him through the gloom.

'Our plans mature,' he muttered softly to himself, rising to seek cover when the tramp sounded at its faintest, and he surmised Devignes had reached the furthest limit of his improvised quarter-deck. 'I did not expect to find ce cher Monsieur quite so close—nor so very much at home. But never mind the reason, with so definite a fact for my enlightenment. Suspicions

are like swallows—one does not make a summer, but if only you wait long enough you will soon see sufficient to make it warm as hell! We must conclude our arrangements before it is too late. I will consult De la Marche once more, and the demoiselle must be pressed into the service. I have that Drury and his foolish master—who had no business to be surprised—'tis a terrible blow to our plans—under my thumb now. She is to be reached through her brother. Vive l'Empereur! All is fair in war.' He slipped like a lynx within doors again.

The day wore slowly on for Marie. She was in a fever of impatience. Deliverance seemed now so near at hand that endurance fairly gave way. How the hours dragged on to that four o'clock when she felt with an uplifting of all her heart in thanksgiving that she might see her difficulties at an end! Never sick man looked for dawn, never prisoner for the day of his final release more eagerly than did Marie to that interview. Her spirits rose unaccountably as the church clock boomed each lingering hour; she even detected herself humming under her breath as of old, and Lady Hepzibah hearing her smiled knowingly to herself.

Devignes had come in just while they were

having breakfast, bringing with him an atmosphere not only of the fresh vigour of the morning, but again that sense of security, of protection, of absolute content. He was in riding-dress, about to go over to the Fort, he said, and would take any messages to Jacques. Lady Hepzibah sent for her cash-box and counted out all the three-penny and fourpenny pieces in it, which she then begged Devignes to carry.

'Not but what I highly disapprove of playing cards for money,' said she. 'But 'tis better he should traffic in mine than perhaps be indebted to someone else. Only tell him, pray, my Lord Carisbrooke, that he is not to exceed threepenny points. I send him nothing higher so that there may be no excuse on the score of insufficient change.'

'It will be a case of celui qui s'excuse s'accuse!' muttered Devignes aside.

'Will you send him nothing?' he then added softly to Marie. Lady Hepzibah was busying herself at the far end of the table in tying the coins up within a long silk stocking. Marie shook her head. And then——

'To-morrow I will,' she said suddenly, and a flash of brightness came over her features, remembering that 'to-morrow' would mean the end of suspense. It would be good news she would be able to send him to-morrow! They would be gone—it would be over!

'I'm a very trustworthy messenger,' said Devignes with mock gravity. He kissed Lady Hepzibah's hand gallantly as he took the stocking, remarking that it made him feel like a Santa Claus, and went away with his spurs jingling, a brave and bonny figure of a man, Marie thought, with a thrill of gladness in her heart as she watched him vault into his saddle. He was a man to be proud of amongst men-proud might be the woman he married, to own and to be owned by him. In those days when war was in the air, 'twas for the qualities of the soldier that men strained and women loved. They forgave for that a great deal that seemed rough, and coarse, and overbearing. And when such qualities came linked with courtesy, when they were found in men who did not disdain to show that they had a heritage from their mothers, and just something of the woman to leaven the excess of purely masculine nature, then they were well-nigh irresistible.

And now Marie counted the minutes till she might perhaps be free—free from the trust, free to be as she felt God meant her to be, nothing but a very simple and affectionate creature, preferring to follow rather than to lead, to obey rather than to dictate.

Four o'clock came at last, when Lady Hepzibah invariably took her siesta, and the house settled down to quiet drowsiness. It was very still as Marie sped quickly along the bare polished boards of the passages, her little heel-less slippers making never a sound to echo through the great empty wing. The warmth of the July afternoon weighted the air, windows were open and the scents of roses and jessamine, wisteria and eglantine that climbed all over the outer walls were wafted in with their tender messages of the gladness, the joy of perpetual love-love infinite and eternal, whether murmured by the sea as it caresses the shore, or lilted by the breeze amongst the flowering trees, whether hummed by the butterflies and bees to the flowers, or sung by the birds to each other. Marie was holding out heart and hands to all they had to say. Did she not know that she was come to her kingdom too? And a blither, bonnier kingdom, for it was to last, not just for a season, a time, a year, but for ever, and ever, and ever. . . . She was dancing along in tune with her own sweet, happy thoughts, to be checked abruptly by the gloom of the dark, unlighted corner that was her goal. . . . What a contrast! Oh, what a thrill of damp, chilling her to the core, came up from the deep dark well of that stone staircase! So cold, so unsympathetic

had the way suddenly become—the sunshine gone, and only the thorns of a distasteful duty before her. Marie stood on the landing and began to light her candle, shivering as she glanced down the stairs. It was like the terrible moment before one plunges headlong into the sea. She threw a look behind her at the flower-scented, sun-filled shelter she was leaving, braced herself to conquer her fate, and plunged down. Her knock must have been eagerly anticipated, for hardly had she put the key in lock before she heard an answering tap.

In another minute she stood within.

CHAPTER XV

It was only to the second room that Drury led her, and when he opened the door Marie found it had undergone a transformation. A table had been brought in and placed in the centre, a big carved oak chair set at one end, and two others ranged on the opposite side. The passage window had been carefully covered, and the rest of the room lay in variegated shadows, for, though no draught was apparent, the unsnuffed candlewicks were already drooping and bobbing in every direction.

The two Frenchmen stepped forward with an elaborate salutation as Marie came in, and then M. Clotilde closed the door into the further room behind them.

'We thought it best not to carry on our discussion in the invalid's presence, lest the noise of talking should disturb him,' said M. de la Motte. He handed Marie to the state chair, behind which Drury took his stand, and he and M. Clotilde de la Marche then seated themselves

opposite. She looked round the room with an intense feeling of repugnance, at the doors closed and shut on either side, the blocked window, and worse than all, the two pairs of horridly glittering hawks'-eyes opposite shining out amidst a whole regiment of flickering ghostly shadows. It was not fear, for every sensation was lost in a supreme effort for self-control. Under the table her hands gripped each other hard. Yet though impulse would have made her rise and run, something else, some rising quality of which she was only dimly conscious, not only kept her to all intents and purposes calmly collected, but possessed an element of not altogether distasteful anticipation. She was on the edge of a precipice, and since there was no going back, why not just peep over and see what was there?

'We think we ought to explain exactly our motive for being here, and also why our friend Le Clos is here,' began M. de la Motte. 'And perhaps you will not mind our elucidating matters by asking you a few questions first—just to find out what it is necessary to tell you,' he added suavely.

'Very good,' said Marie. She held her head high, and faced both men openly. In some odd way her last interview with Devignes, and his constant presence in the house seemed to have given her strength and control beyond what was natural to her. She thought of him now, and was comforted.

'Would you mind telling us what became of the lace our poor friend brought over, and which he gave into your brother's charge?'

Marie hesitated. Would this be betraying aught she should conceal? Then she reflected that there could be neither reason nor right in refusing information here. The absolutely direct course should be hers. That she could understand, and it would be the one most likely to bring her quickly from out of this maze of uncertainties and suspicions.

- 'My brother took it to Dangars, a man in Hastings ——'
- 'Oh, pardon! Pray do not trouble to explain, we know the man by repute.'
 - 'Well, it is there,' said Marie simply.
- 'Would you mind telling us—why did he take it there? For safety?'
- 'It was seen in our possession, and, as we believed, had been recognised as smuggled property. Inquiries were made. But our actual reason,' said Marie colouring painfully, 'was that Dangars had some lace of our own which was being inquired for, and if it had been discovered in his possession everything, so we imagined, must have been found out. Dangars wanted

75l. for it, and we hadn't the money, so we thought the other lace might do as a guarantee, a security, till we could get it. So Dangars took it. It was a wrong thing for us to do, I know, as the lace was not ours, but we chose that plan as the best, because it seemed the only one that would prevent questions being asked—for every one's sake. If we had chanced to have had it in the house when they searched on Monday, it must have been found.'

'Pray do not add a single word in apology,' interrupted De la Motte quickly. His searching eyes had been keenly occupied with her changeful countenance and expression, reflecting every minute shade of thought and passing emotion. 'Believe me, your expedient was not only perfectly legitimate, but has proved the saving of the situation. As you say, had the lace still been with you it must have been found.'

He exchanged a glance with De la Marche, who was idly pencilling little notes on a scrap of paper in front of him. Marie had never noticed him much before, but now she regarded him with some attention. The only impression she received was of a curious anomaly in the combination of extreme gravity of countenance with a ferociously red head, which latter ought to have been accompanied by vivacity, or at least something of gaiety,

so she thought, recollecting Jacques' idiosyncrasies. He appeared to be only half-attending, but Marie thought she knew better, and that his little scratchings were something more than indefinite, meaningless hieroglyphics to pass the time.

'I can give you a fuller and clearer explanation if you like. That is not the whole story, only just how it happened that the lace is now with Dangars.'

'We wish to know nothing further, chère mademoiselle. We have only too many proofs of your absolutely kind and loyal feeling towards us all to question for one instant the judgment you and your brother have exercised. What only concerned us to know was—where the lace is now.'

'With Dangars! And recoverable for 751.,' said Marie.

So far from feeling fear, she was beginning to find her coolness increasing every moment. These men were personally too indifferent to her to arouse any emotion. This was merely business, so to speak, most disagreeable, but impersonal. It had been otherwise with Devignes.

'Pardon me—but do you recollect—did you chance to unroll the bale? It was in a bale?' De la Marche glanced up for a moment, and suspended his occupation.

- 'We didn't undo it at all. M. Le Clos had unwound a good deal, and my brother found the only way to bring it was to wind it round and round himself under his coat till the bale was small enough to go into a pocket. We simply took it as it was.'
- 'Then bale and all went straight to this man?'
- 'Only just sealed up in a packet. We did cut off what was loose—but that was all. Dangars wouldn't undo it, of course. It was only wanted as security.'

De la Motte had his hands, sinewy and square, the tips of the outspread fingers just touching each other, on the table in front of him. He contemplated them silently for some few minutes. He was in reality mentally weighing what he had gleaned from Marie—her face, features, words—concerning herself, with all that his lifetime of experience with women had taught him.

He was twice Devignes' age, and, moreover, had studied women from the standpoint of pleasure in their society. He was much too clever to make any mistakes by underrating either their influence, or, in certain cases, their superior powers of judgment. He had met so many women who were really worthless morally and intellectually, that he knew better than most

men when it was safe, in the case of the one, not only to trust, but to appeal to the same principles of conduct as he would have done had he been dealing with a member of his own sex.

France, all through the eighteenth century, had been flooded with Scotch men and women, mostly Highlanders, refugees and exiles from motives as impersonal as they were self-destructive. De la Motte had known many of them intimately, and it had been an unfailing delight to him to study the peculiar characteristics of the Highland race, a race appealing specially as a subject of interest to all peoples and nations who are capable of admiring, though perhaps not of copying, that ardent passionate clinging to ideas as a motive power in conduct and life, rather than to utilitarian principles.

The true Highland nature will follow to the death any cause, man, or woman who symbolises some specific principle, theory, or idea. The principle may be false or badly applied; it may be a poor or unworthy cause, a degraded man, a faulty woman—but that is not the point. Loyalty, simple-hearted devotion, uncalculating self-sacrifice you may count on—but you must ask it primarily not as an individual, but as the representative of an ideal, a principle.

De la Motte had recalled all this to mind

during the past twenty-four hours, and now, with Marie's actual presence before him, was rapidly renewing the decision he had already arrived at that here was a young woman to whom he would most successfully appeal on that side of her nature which represented her Highland heritage. Coldly appraising, he acknowledged frankly to himself that had it been a French girl whom he was trying to mould to his wishes he would have appealed directly to the sentimental side of her nature. If an Englishwoman—and a caustic sneer embodying ages of racial instinct of antagonism curled his lip—he would have laid most stress, he thought, on the material advantages to be gained, and all such practical considerations.

With Marie Maclean, knowing what he did of Highland blood, and after careful scrutiny of her features—the wide open brow, and the curved mobile lips, the clear unemotional eyes, frank and free as a child's, and the soft rounded chin, the careless vitality of youth, and the natural maidenly dignity—he decided to play upon her by appealing to her sense of loyalty and faith and honour, as embodied to her in the persons for whom she had the greatest affection.

So while Marie sat steadily watching him, and De la Marche went on with his little system of hieroglyphics, he put his line of action in working order. If the risk were great, it at least offered the only chance of success.

'Mademoiselle,' he began gently, 'we are quite safe in taking for granted that you are our friend?'

Marie bowed her head.

- 'We know you to have been loyalty itself to the interests of your friends and ours. We are all deeply involved, from myself to your brother, M. Jacques;' he saw Marie start. 'Your friend, Dr. Scape, has been our host at so many reunions! So, all linked together, down the stream we must go. You know 'tis what they call a hanging matter.' He spoke with intentional abruptness, watching her closely.
 - ' So my brother said,' replied Marie simply.
- 'Was your brother aware—did he tell you—what the bale really contained?'

Marie opened her eyes.

- 'No.'
- 'Well, you must know there was a letter wound up inside that bale—'tis merely a little correspondence between some of us on this side of the water, and some on that. A very little affair, and only in the cause of what you would call, dear mademoiselle, the commonest humanity! It only concerns a poor fellow we are all fond of—devoted to—now over there, who wants his liberty.

He has at last got free from his persecutors, and is in concealment, not knowing where to fly or what to do. Yet 'tis only a quiet spot of earth he wants, where undisturbed he may look after his little household, and plant his little garden, and live simply as an honourable, well-meaning private gentleman, doing good where he can and harm to none. You know, mademoiselle, how terrible a state my own poor country is now in. His property is taken away, he is in wretched health, with nothing to live on or for, separated from wife and family. Mademoiselle, your sympathies are touched?'

'I am sorry, yes,' murmured Marie, the ready tears in her eyes.

'It was for this Le Clos came over, to try, at the risk of his life, if some kind Englishman, sympathetic to the suffering and persecuted, would be friend him. Your good friend, Dr. Scape, promised an asile for a while. My other friend here and I are on the same errand. Mademoiselle, your brother was our true and kind ally. You told us to regard you as in his place. May I ask you in his name now to do what he undertook?'

Marie could not know how skilfully he was manipulating the facts to his own purpose.

'But—but—what would happen?' she faltered.

'Dear mademoiselle, nothing. All we need is that you will, in M. Jacques' name, contrive to recover for us the letter wrapped up in that lace. You could procure it, but no one else. You will readily understand that. And after that, nothing, but help us to make arrangements to carry this poor fellow back.'

'And your friend on the other side?'

'Ah, mademoiselle, events must shape themselves. We mix the right ingredients, but the mould may break after all. But empower us first to get the lace.'

Marie hesitated. What did this mean? She had heard so imperfectly, in her agitation and terror, physically exhausted as she had been at the time, what Devignes had said that morning. Even now she remembered so vaguely as to miss the real import of what she might otherwise have conjectured, from the Colonel's words, was the crux of the situation.

'The lace is, of course, really ours,' pursued De la Motte gently. 'It belongs to poor Le Clos. No one else has a right to it. We would pay the money, and you, mademoiselle, would be rid of a troublesome responsibility. And remember, should the lace be discovered by any one—as at any moment it may—your brother would be seriously implicated.'

- 'But he knew nothing of it,' flashed Marie.
- 'He told you nothing,' corrected De la Motte softly, with a gentle smile of deference to youthful enthusiasm. 'But remember, he and we are old comrades. He would naturally, however accustomed to confide in you, not betray secrets held in common with others. Would that be likely, mademoiselle?'
- 'No,' said Marie reluctantly. 'I suppose not.' It seemed hard to credit, but then the ways of men were as a sealed book to her, she reflected. A month ago she could have sworn to Jacques' perfect openness with her, but the events of the last week had plunged her into a dark sea of doubt, and she felt helpless, only realising more and more how little she really knew of men.
- 'It simply stands thus,' continued the Colonel.
 'If you feel unable to face this responsibility, and prefer to—to—shall I say relieve yourself of it by confiding these affairs to some fellow-countryman?—the word betray has too ugly a sound,' he added thoughtfully, 'then, mademoiselle, we are in your hands, all of us, beginning with your friend, Dr. Scape, and your brother. I need not force on your notice such insignificant personages as ourselves, and, I suppose, a good many of your peasantry here.'

- 'Oh, I couldn't do that! Of course not,' cried Marie.
- 'No? Well then, the other alternative! It is simply to send a note by Drury here authorising him to pay for and reclaim your property from Dangars. It is very simple, merely giving again to us what is the property of our friend.'
- 'Yes,' said Marie, dubiously. 'Of course no one else has a right to it?'
- 'Assuredly not. I could not naturally make such an observation to you, but since you see the position so exactly ——'

His tone had an unpleasant undercurrent of meaning, Marie thought—sensitively alive as she was to any possible inflection—just as though, while taking for granted as a matter of politeness her intention to act uprightly, he entertained some doubt as to how far her business instincts were properly developed. She winced, and coloured hotly.

- 'Oh, of course. Yes. I'll write that,' she said hastily.
- 'Then let us do it now, and finish this business. You will be longing to retire,' said De la Motte courteously. 'See, here are pencil and paper. The merest scrap will suffice.'

He got up and came round to her chair, and Clotilde handed her his pencil and a sheet of paper. It was partly an imperative desire to get away that assailed Marie, and partly the intolerable suspicion that they had thought her not quite honest in the matter of that horrible lace, about which her conscience had smitten her even at the time, that made her scribble her note quickly, without another second's thought. It was soon done, merely a formal note to Dangars, begging him to deliver the packet to the bearer on receipt of 75l. according to arrangement, and signed Maclean in the bold clear characters which Jacques had made her copy from his own signature. De la Motte took up the paper carelessly enough, and Marie lost the momentary glitter in his eyes.

'Then this is accomplished, and a thousand thanks, dear mademoiselle! Will you call to-morrow evening about this time and hear the final arrangements? We have chartered men and a boat for departure to-morrow night, all being well. May we hope to see you then for just a few moments?'

In her glad certainty that at last her term of probation was at an end, and thankful to escape now so easily, Marie gave her hand and a 'yes' with alacrity untempered by prudence.

'A demain!' repeated De la Motte and his companion simultaneously. In her haste to be

gone Marie neither caught Drury's imploring gesture nor noticed that all three men were accompanying her to the staircase. The two Frenchmen, in fact, were bent on preventing any possibility of a private word with or from Drury.

CHAPTER XVI

DEVIGNES called again that evening. He came in without waiting to be announced through the glass doors of the peacock parlour, and stood outlined against the darkening sky until Marie, who was busy putting freshly dried rose petals and other sweet things mixed up together into the big pot-pourri jars, became conscious, as we sometimes are, of being watched, and looked up suddenly and saw him.

Then she put back her head, and laughed at him out of sheer joy that the end of her trial of trust was nearing! Surely, with these men fairly gone out of the house, away for ever, she might consider her duty to Jacques accomplished. Then, she might tell him—she meant Devignes—all that had happened; and ask him to decide as to whether she had done right or wrong, and tell him how troubled she had been, and make him tell her in return what she ought always to do! Surely by to-morrow she might really send that message to Jacques—perhaps ask to see him—

and get absolution! And then—and then? Why then, of course she—Marie never got further than that. Fate and chance, and circumstance, which meant Devignes, would settle the future. So because for the first time she was letting her thoughts dwell unrestrainedly upon him she could not but laugh when she caught sight of him there so unexpectedly! And in three quick strides he was across the room, with a light in his eyes that she did not see only because she knew it was there and dared not meet it.

There is not a very great deal of making needed in the concoction of pot-pourri, though the more you stir the sweeter is the fragrance it gives out. But if you choose to have a helper, then the more simple the task the more satisfactory its accomplishment is likely to be, since it is only an excuse for attention really given elsewhere.

'I am very busy,' said Marie, and she lifted her hands from the big bowl, letting the medley of petals and leaves fall through her wide-spread fingers, rose-stained and damp. 'And I am afraid I must not shake hands with you, for they are so dirty!'

Devignes for all answer took the nearest, and with one of his graceful gestures, stooped, and raised it to his lips.

'Stains such as those,' he said gently, 'are only ones to be proud of—even as are marks like these!'

It was her left hand that he was holding, and as he spoke he lightly smoothed its needle-pierced forefinger.

Marie flushed pink as her hands and the roses, glanced up for a moment, and then down again.

- 'Marks like those?' she faltered nervously.
 'But they are so ugly, and, Aunt Hepzibah says, the sign of a bad needlewoman. One never ought to prick oneself if one works really well!'
- 'I like them,' said Devignes steadily. 'They are honourable scars, suffered in doing service for other people. I could only honour you for them.'

He had no ulterior meaning in his mind as he spoke, but to Marie's overburdened conscience the words seemed to bear a terribly acute significance. These might be honourable scars, yes, but what of those other stains and scars of wrong-doing? Were her hands so clean morally—unstained, unsoiled? She drew her hand from his, and hurriedly plunged it again within the great bowl, her face becoming dyed with hot colour.

'I would rather you didn't!' she blurted out, and bent her head lower lest he should see the stinging tears rise.

But because his feeling for her was sincere, he was able to understand something of what was in her mind, both of her distress and its cause.

'I must think of you as I know you are, Miss Marie,' he said presently, and in a very quiet voice. 'Do you think I have learnt so little all these years—I am more than ten years your senior, do you know—that I depend for my opinions wholly upon outside appearances? I want no explanations from you, I ask none, I never shall—because I do not need them. Remember that. I trust you,' he added, 'as I should like to feel you trusted me.' His voice dropped, a stirring of deep passion vibrated through it, and Marie started, and looked up impulsively. He restrained himself with an effort, his faithful servant, well-proven self-control, coming to his aid.

'I—I—of course I trust you,' she said. 'I—I—'

He suddenly bent over and drew the bowl away from her and nearer to himself, plunged his own two hands deep in the sweet-scented mixture, and laughed softly and gaily all at once like a boy.

'Tell me how you make it, and let me help!'
he said persuasively. 'And you shall see my

hands are not so useless either. Shall I turn back my cuffs, and these ruffles? Will you be very kind, and pin them back for me? You shall see I can be an extremely docile pupil—when I want to learn!

Lady Hepzibah peeped in at the door a little later, tiptoeing away again with a smile and emotional tear to say her prayers directly she was safely on the other side of the door.

But she was obliged to own later on when she came to fill her numerous little Sèvres jars and saucers with the result of that morning's work that, though it had taken so much longer than usual to make, the *pot-pourri* was by no means equal to its ordinary standard. Many ingredients indeed were left out, for Love was so eager to claim his rights that he brooked no rivals that afternoon.

When Devignes left, an hour later, Marie went straight up to her room to mark off one more square from a paper hung close beside her bed. A square for each hour that remained before those Frenchmen would be gone. Marie had made the table almost immediately on leaving them that afternoon, and each fresh cross seemed to set her prison door a little wider.

It chanced that she looked out that night, for it seemed good to her to say her prayers at the open window after she had put out her lamp, trusting to the light of the soft cool moon to show her the number of her psalm. She knelt on to-night long after all her usual petitions were put up, hidden by the curtain and the deep window ledges, and the garden was so well known to her at all times of the twenty-four hours of day, each shadow and each sound were so familiar. that to-night Devignes' presence could not remain undiscovered long. His shadow fell across the moon-white grass, and his step, light as it was. on the turfed walk could not have been mistaken for any one else's. Marie gazed one minute, and the next, fearful, and yet in a glow of happiness that bade her instinctively seek cover, fled to the refuge of her bed, to sleep as though the guardian angel of her childhood's belief was a visible and tangible presence beside her.

Devignes did not come in all the next day, having to spend it in business over at Langley Fort, but Marie was content. She preferred not to see him again until that note to Jacques was ready to send, and she might give it into his hands as though it were the weight of all these past terrible days from which she was releasing herself. But she went singing about her daily duties that day, with a blithe smile, and sunshine in her eyes, while Lady Hepzibah smiled to herself, her

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own thoughts busy with many delightful calculations, all beginning and ending with the welfare of her child.

Things went very easily for Marie's plans that day. Lady Hepzibah had a bad headache, going to bed early and desiring to see no one, so that she was free to come and go unquestioned as she pleased for the rest of the afternoon.

At four o'clock, punctual to the moment, with a heart beating wildly with almost glad excitement, she climbed down that steep dark staircase.

'The last time—the last time!' she was saying over and over to herself in an outburst of thanksgiving.

She did not pause to knock or call, since, knowing that she was expected, she looked to find Drury awaiting her as before. It struck her, then, with a strange chill, a quick horrible premonition of evil, to find on opening the door that the whole place was sunk in silent heavy gloom. Both doors were flung wide open, straight into the porch-room itself, and the silence gave back not one single echo of voice or footstep or sound of breathing, the light of her candle making but a fitful inroad upon the darkness. Marie's exhilaration faded as fire before the sun's rays, and instead a horrible depression seized upon her. But holding her candle high above her head, so

that its circle of light might be thrown as far round as possible, she hastened through.

Just as she entered the porch-room she heard a slight noise from behind the screen, and in another minute M. de la Motte stood before her.

He bowed, but as though his good manners were merely so much a part of himself that no strain of circumstance could make him abandon them; the gallantry was gone, he was evidently exercising the greatest self-control, with his real thoughts far otherwise engaged.

- 'I am glad you are come, mademoiselle. I have had, of course, no possible means of reaching you, and I have been waiting every moment hoping to hear from you. A terrible catastrophe has befallen us. Drury and M. Clotilde de la Marche have never returned!'
 - 'Never returned!'
- 'They went out at three this morning, intending to make their way to Hastings. Whether they got there or not I cannot say. They have not come back.' His tones were dry and harsh.

Marie's courage and capacity, in the face of what threatened to be a crisis of immediate peril, rose instantaneously. It sometimes happens that the energies of persons of an extremely sensitive temperament are braced by a sudden shock where those of others apparently far more robust are paralysed.

'Are they arrested?'

'That is what I do not know. I could find out in the village if I had any one to leave here. Mademoiselle, may I entreat you to help me? Will you wait for half an hour and set me free to inquire? Something has happened. It is imperative we should know what.'

All that this last event might portend flashed upon Marie, and she made up her mind at once. Every faculty was roused to grapple with the new danger.

'Yes, I'll stay. You mean to watch M. Le Clos? Tell me exactly what to do for him, and I'll do it. How long should you be?'

'Mademoiselle, half an hour at least. It may be longer, but I will be back directly it is possible.'

'Pray show me what I must do without delay, monsieur.'

He looked at her for a moment with a gleam of something that meant a good deal more from such a man than mere personal admiration.

'I was not deceived in you, I perceive,' he muttered into his moustache, and led the way abruptly round the screen. 'Mademoiselle, I leave you with infinite regret, but this affair concerns the safety of too many persons for me to

hesitate. I must find out what has occurred, and at once. Our only chance of ever getting away lies in this, and in immediate action. All you have to do is to sit here and give the poor fellow these drops should there appear any change. He may talk a little in delirium, but will probably lie just as he is now—absolutely quiescent. And God grant that he may just live until I can return, for your sake,' he added under his breath, as he strode towards the outer door.

Marie stood and waited till softly, softly she heard the door close behind him—heard the key turn and be withdrawn, and then a faint scrunch of gravel outside. The silence that succeeded was so absolute that she felt as if it were settling down upon her like some funereal pall. She shook off the impression instantly, and resolutely turned to face her immediate duty.

Le Clos lay very still. His delirium had ceased for a time, and he seemed to have lapsed into complete unconsciousness. Outlined still and straight under the coverings, he might have been a corpse already embalmed had it not been for the strained breathing. His face was half hidden, but when presently he moved, and she rose to give him the mixture De la Motte had pointed out, she saw with a pang of surprise what a boy's face it was, despite the wasting marks of

suffering. Hardly older than Jacques he seemed to be. How easily it might have been Jacques, she thought. At sight of him, Marie's apprehension all faded away, and instead the natural womanly instinct and desire to heal and console something weaker, younger, more helpless than herself rose to take its place. She brought her stool close to the bed, smoothing coverlet and pillow with a lingering touch of compassion, and presently she dipped her handkerchief in the open saucer of brandy, which was all she could see likely to be of any use, and tried very gently to moisten his damp forehead, and the dark hair matted over the pillow. There was so little she could do, and her heart ached at the thought that probably somewhere far away there must be some other woman, some sister or mother, some one who loved this boy as she knew how to love herself, and who would have given half her life to be in that place by his dying bed.

The great tears rose and fell unheeded; they were not for herself, nor did any personal thought once arise during that long hour of vigil before De la Motte reappeared. As she heard the click in the lock a sudden impulse seized her, and she bent over and kissed the boy's upturned unconscious face.

'Some day I may chance to meet some of his

own people, and they will like to know I did it for their sakes,' was the thought of her heart. Then she knelt for one brief moment, and went gently out to meet De la Motte.

He came in dishevelled and caked in mud, his clothes running water and making little pools all about him, as he stood facing her without a word. The seconds seemed ages as Marie waited in suspense, and when he spoke it was with a brevity which stamped what he did say indelibly on her brain.

'Mademoiselle, they were arrested, and with the lace! Our plans are therefore so far fully revealed. I reiterate that the safety now of all concerned, your brother included, rests with you. I am practically helpless. How far are you prepared to go?'

The last hour had left Marie without thought or consideration beyond what those four walls contained.

'In what way?' she asked steadily.

De la Motte threw out his hands.

'Mademoiselle, we approach a crisis. Had Drury and De la Marche returned, things might be different. As it is, I must simply throw myself on your mercy. I cannot move Le Clos by myself, I must have some confederates to help me. To-night between eight and nine o'clock

a boat was to be in waiting, in a straight line exactly south from here, to carry us off. Mademoiselle, we cannot go to-night, unless some further arrangement is made. Some competent and trustworthy person must see the Captain and explain, and under these altered circumstances take my further instructions. There is no possibility of my employing any of our friends in the village; every suspect has been arrested, every cottage is sentinelled. I saved myself just now by mere chance, and only got my information from one of the men five minutes before he himself was taken up. I was in his cottage, and escaped from the back door, while he held the soldiers in parley at the front. Had it not been that his back garden has a deep ditch full of water running along the bottom, I must have been caught too. It prevented their surrounding the place immediately, and I hid in it and scrambled along till I got to where it ran into the woods. You see the state I am in. Now, mademoiselle, there is but one way. It must be either you or I who will undertake to meet the boat. and send some one up to help move this lad. He is but a lad, but 'tis nearly a mile through copse and underwood and over that terrible gorse to the shore, and it would be hopeless for one man to try and drag him down the cliff. Detection

would be certain, and it would kill him outright. Now, mademoiselle, what do you say?'

'I will certainly stay here, if you like, and wait while you go,' said Marie.

'Very good. It is all I should like to ask you. But, mademoiselle, I am already being searched for, and if seen anywhere I should be arrested at once. Moreover, the ways of your cliffs are strange to me. Were I arrested-and the soldiers swarm everywhere—what would happen? You would be left here with a dying man, helpless and alone, and everything we have striven for all this time would be lost. Mademoiselle, I want you to be the bearer of the message. I shall write all I want to say by way of instruction, and all you will have to do is simply to take an evening stroll along the cliff. You frequently do, I have often watched you. Eight o'clock in summer is not late. At Veness Gap you will see a man who, if he is one of the boat's crew, will wear a blue speedwell in his cap, and you will greet him with Bonsoir. will answer in Italian. It is the countersign agreed on. You will give him my letter, and he will tell you at once what he can arrange. The whole thing will not take half an hour. Mademoiselle, you will do this?'

Marie moved restlessly. She had followed

all he said with a miserable conviction that his proposal was the inevitable one. It would be safe, and, in a way, not so very unnatural, if she did chance to be seen on the cliffs even so late as eight o'clock. And it was undoubtedly impossible for him to avoid detection in comparative daylight; she realised that.

If during her moment of hesitation she had any doubts, the swift remembrance of Le Clos, and the possible some one waiting for him on the other side, dispelled them.

'I will do it,' she said decidedly.

De la Motte wasted no time in thanks. He merely gave her a look, then turned abruptly away and seated himself at a bench close at hand.

'I will write what I have to say now, and deliver it to you, mademoiselle. Then I shall simply trust all to you, and Providence.'

Marie left him bent over his pen and paper, scribbling with curious intentness, and returned to Le Clos' bedside. When the sound of the scratching ceased, she took up her candle and went round the screen again. De la Motte gave her the paper, tied round with a bit of string and sealed, with no further preliminary. Then taking the candle from her hand he preceded her to the little door.

Marie paused there for one moment.

'We shall probably not meet again, monsieur. I shall do this your last bidding, and then leave the rest in your hands. Your friends will come. of course, and you will be ready for them. In any case, I shall tell your messenger that I can do no more, and that he must manage to come up here in person if there is anything more to be arranged. I shall tell him to knock four times, with a pause between each knock, so that there need be no mistake. Is this clear, monsieur, and as you wish?'

De la Motte's face and gleaming eyes were in shadow, but he answered in distinct and emphatic tones enough.

'Certainly, mademoiselle. Parfaitement!'

'Then-bon voyage. It is all I have left to sav.'

She held out her hand, but apparently he did not see it, darting forward at that moment to release her cloak from a splinter in the doorway. He bowed most profoundly in farewell, however, in true Gallic fashion, as she went up the steps.

'Adieu, chère demoiselle,' he said in reply. 'Bon voyage,' he added to himself with a complete change of tone as he picked his way cautiously back, 'is what I should wish you, I am of opinion! I will not take your hand, however, since, much as I respect, I am forced to deceive you.' His smile was sardonic, and full of a certain triumph. Reaching the porch-room again he poured out a tumblerful of brandy and water, and then—

'The position is at least saved, though the cause is lost,' he murmured meditatively. 'Meanwhile, bon voyage to the demoiselle, and vive l'Empereur!'

He emptied his tumbler at a draught.

CHAPTER XVII

It was nearly six o'clock by the time Marie was again in her room, and for two things, otherwise to be reckoned as misfortunes, she found herself giving thanks—Devignes' expressed intention of not again visiting them that day, and Lady Hepzibah's headache. It meant that her long absence had passed unnoticed; that the fact of her being an hour late for dinner would provoke no particular comment; and that she would be able to come and go on her present errand without any inconvenient questions being asked.

She ate her dinner, paid a visit to Lady Hepzibah, informed the servants that she was going out for a walk and might not be back till late, when she would probably go straight to bed, and by eight o'clock was speeding cautiously through heather and gorse to the *rendezvous*. The broad turfed sweep of cliff stretched fair before her under the setting sun, and everything in Nature was crying out to her for admiration in the dewy freshness of the evening after the

sultriness of the day. But Marie had neither eyes nor hearing nor thoughts for anything but just the immediate necessity impelling her forward—the breaking through the prickly gorse, and the picking her way over rough places.

De la Motte's letter was within the body of her gown, and she held it tightly clasped there with one hand, while with the other she tried to keep the heavy folds of her cloak from catching on the prickles. Progress was slow, and, moreover, eager as was her desire to accomplish the duty, her heart was leaden within her.

Veness Gap is but an opening in the cliff edge, with steps roughly cut out in the iron clay leading down upon the beach. Unless you knew just where it came along the coast-line, you might well miss it, for the mouth of the staircase is both narrow and well-covered with bushes and hanging shrub, which clothe all the face of the cliff to the very shingle for miles along that part of the coast. Thick and close and outspreading they grow, covert for any number of men winding up that secret way.

Marie knew the Gap well enough, for it had been her childhood's way of getting quickly to the shore, while the ordinary shelving road meant a mile of extra walking. But scan cliff and beach and shore as she might there was no sign of any human presence. Except for the gulls circling inland over her head, and screaming at her and at each other, she was alone.

'There'll be bad weather coming up,' observed Marie with a sage shake of her head as she noticed them wheel and dip, and she drew her cloak round her with an instinctive shudder as the thought of the night voyage to be made crossed her mind, with a pang of compassion for the travellers.

But cloudless as yet was the wide cover of blue sky, and not a breath of wind stirred the smooth expanse of mirroring glass at her feet. The tide was full; and listening to the monotonous chant of its swelling under-currents, and watching the play of light and shade across it, insensibly she lost consciousness of time.

The sinking sun was marking out a farewell path of glory, growing brighter and wider in its passage till it lost itself in the intensified glow where the sunset made heaven and sea one. Marie's thoughts travelled with it, as her eyes mechanically traced its way—far into that indefinite land of dreams which surely alone could be its goal! She watched till the dropping of the sun behind the horizon line and the gradual dimming of the brilliant tones of colour brought her back to earth with a sudden start. Then it

occurred to her how foolish it was to be standing in full relief against a cloudless sky, in such a position that no one happening to be on the lookout could fail to see her half a mile off. After all, it would be both quicker and safer to go down the cliff just a little way and meet the messenger.

The steps were shelving and irregular, and the dew had made their mixture of clay and sand sticky and dangerously slippery. Some of them were two or three feet in depth, and the overhanging briars, which prevented any possibility of seeing the way, made descent doubly difficult. She got on but slowly, and halfway down was glad to pause for rest. Here, just turning a little aside to the left, was a sort of natural platform or landing-stage to the first flight, where out of the cliff there bubbled a fresh-water spring, forming, under the shadow of bracken fern and briars, a clear shallow pool of constantly running water. Glad to take breath after her exertions, Marie knelt down on the narrow cleared space of turf around it, and bending over scooped up some of the water in the hollow of her palm. Straightening herself again, she saw at that moment, rising from below, a cap crowned with speedwell.

'Bon soir,' said Marie, rising hastily. She almost felt as if she were acting in some 'Arabian

Nights' tale, with the Geni rising in answer to a draught from the magic fountain!

The bright blue eyes, matching the speedwell, and set in a fair bearded face, had no sooner caught sight of her than the countersign was uttered, and in another moment the owner of the She looked at him gravely, cap stood beside her. and thought him a strange Italian, if such truly was his nationality. Not that she had ever personally known any Italians, but it seemed incredible to her that this brawny, fair-skinned, blue-eyed giant could belong to any other than a Northern race. She would certainly have supposed him to be an Englishman. However, when, after reading the letter which she silently handed to him, he turned to address her, it was in a torrent of such incomprehensible words that she could only conclude that she had made a mistake. Whether his native tongue or no, it was certainly not English. and foreign to her. Not a syllable could she understand.

Marie shook her head; he only continued gesticulating and talking the faster. She tried to explain, first in English and then in French—a little impatiently, for this was an unexpected deviation from the straightforward programme that she had been led to expect. All he did was to shake his head vigorously, as if quite impossible

to guess what she meant, meanwhile standing in such a way in the narrow entrance to the platform as to completely bar her return journey.

Marie began to feel extremely annoyed, and after a few more vain attempts, her temper rising higher and higher under the strain and vexation of delay, finally gave up the unequal struggle, shook her head decisively several times, and motioned to him abruptly to stand aside and let her But the instant he perceived this go back. intention, his volubility ceased; he seized her by the coat sleeve with one hand, and with the other pointed downwards. Marie hesitated a moment, and then looked in the direction indicated. Peering over, she saw under the lee of the cliff a group of three or four men, and it now dawned upon her that being unable himself to make his message clear he possibly wanted her to accompany him a little further down so that these companions of his might interpret. She felt aggrieved; she wanted to return, and, besides, this was hardly fair treatment after what De la Motte had said would be the limit of all she was expected to do. But it was really such an unsatisfactory meeting, and so reluctant did she feel to leave the affair in these obviously incompetent hands, that she decided it would be wiser to do as he wished. Anything was better at this

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last moment than an untoward mischance in the plan. Signing to him therefore to precede her, she signified her willingness to follow him. He hurried on, leaping like a deer from point to point, while Marie, obliged to be more cautious in her long skirts, came slowly behind. She had reached the last step but one, her eyes and hands fully occupied, when a cry from above startled her. She glanced up, had a sort of instantaneous impression of men scrambling down the path behind her, looked round again at the men awaiting her at the foot, and the next instant found herself enveloped in a dark cloak thrown tightly over her head, lifted off her feet, and carried rapidly over the shifting shingle. arms were pinned to her side, and the folds of cloth pressed round her face stifled voice and breath. The hoarse monotone of the sea rose and fell with the hideous grating of the beach as her bearer and his companions plunged ankle deep in the yielding stones, and then with a jerk and a bound dragged themselves out again. It was a nightmare of sound. Consciousness was slipping from her; she was dimly aware of the grating of a keel, the swish of the parting waters, the rush of feet. mingled with the rough shouts of men, and then came oblivion. . . .

Marie opened her eyes again upon a star-lit

sky, deep and calm and black above her. thought she must be lying face upwards, but her senses seemed paralysed, and all thought was resolved into speculation as to what the curious constant opening and shutting of bright little eyes so far, far up above her meant. Then she became aware of damp fresh air upon her cheeks, and wrinkling up her forehead cautiously she felt her skin stiff with crusting salt. This is something to do with the sea, she thought. Then there fell on her ears the sound of a peculiar hard rubbing, with an occasional squeak to vary its monotone; surely it could be nothing but the screw of oars as they turned rhythmically in the rowlocks! put out one hand and felt the side of a boat. Consciousness, full and complete, returned. Marie raised her head, and looked about her.

It was night: starlit, but just now moonless, for there were heavy clouds here and there. She found that she was lying in the bottom of a boat, wrapped in a big military cloak. Beside her in the stern was sitting a man, but from the level where she lay only his hands hanging over his knees could be seen. They were those of a gentleman—no hewer of wood or drawer of water this!

Opposite her, and rowing stroke, was the blueeyed Italian: in the seat behind him rowed another equally powerful man, and in the bows, hunched up together, she saw two others. At some little distance astern she perceived the outline of another boatload following hard on. And at this stage, beyond all and every other feeling, curiosity gripped her. She raised herself into a sitting position, looked round at the man beside her, and gasped outright. It was M. de la Motte, and he sat surveying her with a certain amused speculation which more than anything else, like a shock of cold invigorating water, brought back her self-control.

- 'I thought I could not mistake your hands,' she observed. 'Kindly allow me to sit up.'
- 'Do you feel quite equal to it?' inquired De la Motte with paternal solicitude, and his gracious impenetrable manner at its best. 'Pray allow me to help you! Now you must drink this—no, don't refuse, you must indeed. And let me put that cushion behind you. See, there's plenty of room here on the stern seat for both of us. Is that comfortable? How rejoiced I am to see you have recovered!'

'I can help myself, I thank you,' replied Marie shortly. 'Neither do I require any brandy.'

De la Motte only held up his flask to catch what light was possible, and then carefully poured out a modicum of the spirit into the cup that he was holding. 'Oh yes, dear mademoiselle. 'Tis night, and cold, and it would be lacking in that superb self-command which you have exhibited in so high a degree to refuse my ministrations now because—you do not quite comprehend their import!'

Marie submitted in silence to drink what he offered her. He took the cup again with perfect gravity of demeanour, and proceeded to pile up cushions behind her, placed one for her feet to rest on, and folded another rug over her knees.

- 'We can now talk quite comfortably,' said he.
 'You will listen to me, mademoiselle?'
- 'I must,' said Marie, with a sweeping glance round. Anger, real and intense, had seized hold of her to the exclusion of fear.
- 'Oh no, you might sleep,' replied M. de la Motte equably. 'But I am sure you wish to be enlightened quite as much as I to explain. We deal in explanations as with counters in this affair,' he added thoughtfully. 'Poor substitutes for marketable coin, they serve to mark the progress of the game. Tell me, mademoiselle, you are naturally thinking hard thoughts of me?'

Marie replied with an uncontrollable flash of the eyes.

'Tell me why you should presuppose that, and my reply will be ready.'

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He nodded as if in approval of this touch of defiance, and was silent some few minutes, gazing over the dark heavy water. Marie looked too, and guessed from its look that they must be far out at sea.

He seemed to have an intuitive and really diabolical way of answering unspoken questions, she noticed, not for the first time, as he took out his watch and tried to read its face.

'It must be past midnight, and we are nearly in mid-Channel,' he observed. 'It will be several hours before we can possibly arrive; my recital would while the time away for you.'

'And where do you mean to take me?' exclaimed Marie, arousing to the full consciousness of her position. She turned upon him with blazing eyes. 'Answer me, M. de la Motte! Where am I being taken? But I suppose it is useless for me to expect a truthful reply.'

M. de la Motte met her eyes steadily with his own cold ones.

'You are right to reproach me. I have used you, I own it, to serve an end—not my own, God forbid, mademoiselle!' He paused, and the gravity of his expression deepened till despite herself Marie caught something of his mood.

'Had there been anything personal in all this, mademoiselle, I swear to you, on the faith of a

nobleman and a Christian, you should not have been involved. I am old enough to be your father. Did I ever tell you, by the way, that I knew him? We were comrades in old days in Paris. If only for that remembrance no hair of your head should have been touched. But this is no personal matter: I am acting, I have acted, with all indeed concerned, merely as means to a glorious, a noble end! Is it necessary for me to speak to your father's daughter of what may be sacrificed willingly for the sake of a cause? the sake of devotion to a sovereign? I am sure not. Is it not because you have been actuated by motives far above any selfish, egotistical ideas of personal advantage that it has been possible to involve you at all? Mademoiselle, will you let me tell you a story?—it will not take long, and it is true.'

All the time he had been speaking in low incisive tones which vibrated with earnestness, and Marie's eyes gazed deeply into his, fascinated by this glimpse into the strong, dominant, inner personality of a genuine enthusiast. The flippancy of the man of the world had slipped from him like a snake's deserted skin. For herself all lesser feelings were absorbed in interest.

'Tell me;' she said, and forgot in that moment

all that was strange in their midnight hour of intercourse under the mocking stars.

'I will tell you the story, mademoiselle, as of a friend of mine. It is of a man who is as a god amongst men, whose destiny has drawn to him, as a magnet draws to itself every atom of true steel that comes within its radius, every personality capable of appreciating and adoring greatness, true and indisputable! Mademoiselle, the stars in their courses have bowed to him, and mortals can but follow in their wake. I have had the honour of being numbered amongst those privileged to see and know him most nearly. I told you before of the friend for whom Le Clos had given his life, and M. Clotilde and I risked our liberty. It is in his service that I have not scrupled to use every tool in my power. moiselle, it is the sometime conqueror of Europe of whom I speak—remember I am a Frenchman -it is the great Napoleon I mean.'

Marie was hanging upon his words now. De la Motte dropped the note of passionate fervour, and his next sentences were delivered with the clearness of a practical mind descending into the arena of daily life and dealing with its facts.

'The case stands thus. Our Emperor, as you know, left the field of Waterloo to the Allies. The Allies were eager for his blood, his liberty,

his life, but they did not know where or how to find him! Well, mademoiselle, you deserve the truth if any one in this world does, and you may believe I am telling it when I assure you that nothing now can make the least difference to him. If it could,' he added, with a tinge of humour, 'I would possibly not answer so candidly for myself! Unknown and untraced, save for a few chosen and devoted adherents, he made for the His friends were always on the alert; coast. already they had devised means of escape for him. Many countries were thought of, but America of all others seemed to offer the fairest field. But it was found wellnigh impossible to leave; up and down, all along, every inch of the coast is hourly watched by your British ships. Before the Emperor had arrived at Rochefort, which he did last Monday, we had discovered but one hope of an asylum. Curiously enough (but fate is always ironic), it was to be with his bitterest foes! Communication with France has long evaded all surveillance, as you know-I speak of the smuggling trade. By this medium correspondence was entered into with his friends, notably ourselves, on this English side. went well for a time. Our good angel, Dr. Scape, who for years had found safety as an exiled and prosecuted clansman on French soil, undertook

the main task. He promised a safe asylum in his house for a time, until, suspicion being allayed, the trip across to America might be undertaken. We-De la Marche and myselfcame over secretly as his guests to make arrangements on this side of the water. Poor Le Clos.' De la Motte crossed himself piously with a muttered prayer, 'was the chief agent on the He crossed on that fatal Friday-he might have known such a day would have been disastrous. Whether some traitor betrayed us we shall never know now, but your Commandant and my old friend, my Lord of Carisbrooke, were on the alert. You know the rest from that standpoint, mademoiselle?'

'But from yours?'

Ah, indeed! Well, Le Clos that 'Ours? night was bringing over despatches from the Emperor, with the final arrangements. Those were contained in that disastrous bale. imagine our feelings, mademoiselle, when we learnt after that affray last Friday night that the lace and despatches had totally disappeared! Le Clos never recovered consciousness. We had no means of knowing what had been concerted, or how to warn the Emperor. Then came We were with him, but Dr. Scape's arrest. escaped and took shelter in a public-house on Pevensey Marsh till Drury brought us word of the sequel—of your gallant befriending of Le Clos. We have to thank you for all our lives, mademoiselle!

He stopped, and raised Marie's hand to his lips.

'Drury meant well, but is but a bourgeois no one could absolutely confide in him. Mademoiselle, you were our only refuge.'

Marie passed over this equivocal compliment.

'Our last and only hope was to get news of that lace—which we did, you know how. Mademoiselle, I fear I must now confess to having woven for you a tissue of falsehoods.'

'Tell me only the truth now!'

De la Motte resumed his evasive manner, as Marie could not but feel.

- 'Ask me any questions you please, mademoiselle,' he replied.
 - 'That is no Italian!' said Marie abruptly.
- 'He? Oh, no! An Englishman domiciled in Holland—to escape consequences. He was once in your Navy, but disliked it, and went without farewell. The most useful people, mademoiselle, are those under a cloud, let me tell you! For they will do anything to avoid daylight!'
 - 'Why did he pretend not to understand?'

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- 'Oh, mademoiselle, difficulties sometimes teach us the gift of other tongues than our own!'
- 'Is that M. de la Marche I see in the stern of that boat following us?'

The moon had gleamed out for a moment, and her senses, suspiciously alert, had caught a momentary glimpse of the boatload astern.

- 'It is.'
- 'How comes he here? Wasn't he arrested? Wasn't Drury?'
- 'Mademoiselle, Drury was arrested, and with the despatches, but De la Marche escaped.'
- 'Then why could not he have taken the message to-night? And was it all preconcerted—oh, monsieur, did you mean me to be carried off? Oh, why, why, why?'

Her eyes were big with reproach, and with dawning fear. Gradually the mental horizon was clearing. Rapidly her mind was passing in review the long train of recent events, and the cry she gave was that of some snared bird who all at once becomes conscious of the serpent's coils closing round it.

'Pray, only pray tell me!'

De la Motte thought carefully over what he should indeed say. The whole truth, he decided, in common justice he could not tell her; as means to an end he held what he had done to be per-

fectly justifiable, but it was really difficult to be quite candid with Marie, the unconscious helpless tool, sitting actually beside him. It was surely best to spare her feelings!

He decided to suppress how entirely the scheme had been preconcerted, from the moment when the arrest of Dr. Scape had made fresh plans imperative; and the finding of Le Clos in such safe quarters had suggested one. The arrest of Drury and the despatches had merely meant another turn of the screw, necessitating a readjustment with more speedy development of their plans. It had rendered escape imperative, with immediate warning conveyed to Napoleon at all hazards. De la Motte had himself given the final instructions as to Marie's capture to the boat's crew in the letter she had innocently carried.

'We were obliged to come to-night, mademoiselle. But already we were followed. Hardly had you got to the cliff when I started, with poor Le Clos, De la Marche assisting me. We wished you to go alone and first—mademoiselle, pardon me, we dared not leave you!'

Marie sat silent. Then she spoke in a very low voice: 'Where are you taking me?'

'Mademoiselle, the end of your voyage shall be—the great Napoleon! I swear to you that

by the next tide, all being well, you shall be sent back with an English crew! And there are thousands of men and women who would gladly be in your place! Think, an interview with the greatest conqueror the world has ever seen!'

- 'They are welcome,' said Marie shortly.
- 'Oh, mademoiselle! So we reject the left hand of the gods, wanting the right, and forgetting they never give with both.'
- 'Who is in that further boat? M. le Clos? I see some one lying down.'

De la Motte crossed himself. 'It was Le Clos!' he said solemnly.

Marie relapsed into silence, and resting her hands on the gunwale, buried her face in them. She thought no longer, because she no longer cared, about her personal safety, but her heart in miserable longing swept back towards those she had left behind. Oh, what would they be thinking, enduring, suffering on her account!

The rhythmic swing of the steady oars and the dripping water alone broke the stillness. The wind began to rise and moan softly, and the swell increased; a few drops of rain mixed with the spray from the dashing oars. Wrapped tightly in his cloak, De la Motte leaned back immovable, and the expression in his face grew tenser every moment. Every now and again, he took out his

watch, vainly endeavouring to read its face; but it was easy to know by the increased strain of the heaving water against the oars, and the plunge of the boat as she answered to the rowers, that the pace was slackening. The two boats were close alongside, and the breath of the men sounded short and sharp now between their teeth. De la Motte swore gently and continuously to himself; he knew that for the last hour the progress had lessened by just half what it had been before.

And light as he had made of it, he knew too that their boats had been sighted when scarce a mile out, and that the English cutters were after them, swift and keen.

It was fruitless to expect to distance them in those open boats—he had never hoped it. But in the dark no one could say what might not chance, and the Dutch lugger standing out as far as she dared to meet them, beating up and down Channel, would not now be far off. He was busy commending himself to luck and his patron saint—but when all at once in a sudden lull of the wind he caught the swish of churning water close at hand, and a rift in the clouds showed that it was no Dutch lugger pressing hard upon them, the same light revealed his face set harder than man had ever seen it.

Marie, starting round as the first shot whizzed

athwart their bows, caught sight of it, and she recoiled before it, with her first experience that night of absolute terror. Over her rushed in overwhelming force the realisation of her utter helplessness.

He was standing upright, his person displayed as an open target before there was time for another shot to be fired.

'Hold! I demand parley. Cease firing. Is my Lord of Carisbrooke on board?'

Devignes' voice, ringing and clear, came out of the darkness, in sharp crisp accents:

- 'I am here. Who speaks?'
- 'The Baron de la Motte. We have met before. I demand speech for two minutes, and then fire if you please. We can offer no resistance.'
 - 'Say on.'

Then De la Motte spoke his last words to Marie, his voice hard as forged metal.

'You asked why, mademoiselle? I tell you now you are here in the service of the Emperor. I will show you how!'

He straightened himself as he spoke.

'Monsieur! We have on board here with us a lady of your acquaintance, Mademoiselle Maclean. The next shot fired from you, whatever its destined goal, goes through her. Will you take her, and let us pass?' Marie heard as if in a dream.

'I repeat it on the faith of a De la Motte, as you have known me of old!'

The boats and the cutter were swinging close alongside each other, and as the moon peeped out again the faces of all were clearly to be seen.

'We are fugitives, throwing up the sponge! Will you take our hostage? I am not playing.'

And the stern significance of his tone thrilled more than one listener with horror.

Then Marie woke as from a nightmare to find herself face to face with Devignes.

There were men supporting her on either side as she stood swaying, so it seemed to her dazed consciousness, on the brink of the dark yawning gulf of black water. Devignes leaning forward was speaking her name slowly and clearly, as if she needed to be aroused from sleep.

For one instant the kindly moon shone out again, and in the light of what she read in his face she realised that it was Life that beckoned to her. He held out his arms, and she left the old world of terrors behind her once for all, as she sprang straight into them.

Lady Hepzibah, leaning on the Commandant's arm, wore the Bonnet at Marie's Wedding!



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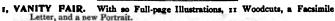
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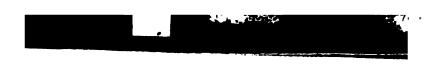
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